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Prologue

The faintest glimpse of sunlight could be seen in the distance as the dawn of a new spring day began. The sky was painted with a light orange hue and fluffy pink clouds. In the distance, a bird or two let out a quiet chirp as the world began to wake once more.

Deep within the forest, Apple, a red fox, had been awake for hours while she birthed her second litter of fox kits. Her mate, Copper, sat near her as she gave birth to five healthy kits.

The darkened kits suckled at her belly as the sun fully rose. Copper glanced down at them in admiration. He had been a parent before, though his kin had grown and gone off. He couldn't believe he had forgotten how frail new life was at first.

"How many were in the last litter? Four?" Copper tried to remember.

Apple nodded. "Yes, but only two made it. Five kits, hm? It's going to take some energy to keep up with them."

Copper chuckled slightly, supposing he would be sore from playing soon.

"Two tods, three vixens," Apple noted.

"Should we name them?" Copper inquired.

The vixen dipped her head, gazing at her kits. She looked at the two tods first and decided to name the one with the lighter fur.

"He can be called 'Hop,'" she decided. "And the other, 'Pounce.'"

"Are we going with a theme here?" Copper asked.

"Don't you like the names?" Apple asked.

"Of course!" her mate replied.

She turned to the three vixens now. One had visibly darker brown fur than the rest while the others were nearly the same shade.

"Let's call the dark vixen 'Rush,'" Copper suggested.

Apple turned to look at the final two. One was visibly smaller than the other.

"The small one can be called 'Whorl.'"

"And what about the last one?" Copper asked, looking down at his daughter.

"Chase," Apple decided.

The kits remained blind, deaf, and helpless for the coming days. Apple spent all her time with them, letting them nurse while Copper caught her as much prey as he could to keep her strength up.

"They'll open their eyes soon," Apple told him when he returned one day. "I can tell."

"I can't wait for them to see me! To see us!" Copper exclaimed.

Apple nodded and grinned, watching as the kits squirmed. They had already gotten much bigger. It wouldn't be long, she thought, until they were running around the den.

A few days before the kits finally opened their eyes, Copper returned with a plump rabbit for his mate. As he entered the den, he grumbled to himself, capturing Apple's attention.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Almost lost this rabbit to a cat," he growled.

"Cat? Have they stranded too far from their homes?" Apple wondered. She knew that some humans lived off in the distance, but it seemed strange for cats to be this far in the forest.

"I've been suspecting something for a while, and I think I'm right," Copper muttered.

Apple tilted her head.

"I think feral cats have moved into the forest, near our territory," Copper explained.

"Feral cats? How many?"

"A good number," Copper told her, sitting down.

Apple quivered slightly. Cats could be dangerous to her kits if they stranded too far. She let out a quiet whimper as she imagined the harm that could come to them.

"Don't get too upset," Copper assured her. "We're not in the middle of their territory, just on the outskirts. Besides, what are a few cats compared to some big foxes?"

Apple nodded, trying to ignore her anxious nerves.

"We just won't stray too near," Copper explained. "Still, it bothers me. Those no good cats stealing all the prey when they're not even meant to live in the forest. I wish they'd never come..."

Chapter 1

"Be light on your feet when you run, dear," came Apple's gentle call as the young Chase bounded around the den with her siblings. Her sister, Whorl, was excitedly running after her as they played their normally-scheduled afternoon game of tag.

Pounce and Hop, her two brothers, were in the midst of wrestling each other. Hop, being the larger one, was easily pinning his brother down as the two dark kits playfully growled at each other.

Rush, meanwhile, sat in the corner, licking the dirt off one of her paws while their mother looked on.

Chase continued running away from her sister, letting out loud giggles with each skip she did. Suddenly, she tripped and collapsed right into her brothers, knocking Hop off of Pounce. Pounce immediately took action, pinning his brother down.

"Oi! Watch where you're going, Chase," Hop growled. He the turned his attention to Pounce. "I would've won, you know."

"As if," Pounce teased.

Chase slowly regained her senses and sat up. Suddenly, she felt Whorl's small paw touch her side.

"Tag!" Whorl teased.

"Curses," Chase spat, standing up again. She panted heavily, out of breath from rushing around the den for so long. She glanced around, watching her siblings interact and her mother watch on fondly. Chase grinned a bit to herself, glad that this was her family. She wouldn't trade it for the world.

"What's all this ruckus I'm hearing?" came a grumble from outside the den.

"Daddy!" came a shout from Rush as she bounded toward the

entrance.

Chase glanced up, watching as her father, a tall and broad fox, stepped inside with a dead squirrel.

"Can I have a taste of meat?!" Hop begged, jumping around his father.

"You kits are still drinking milk," Apple explained.

"This is for your mother," Copper said, dropping the dead squirrel at her feet. Chase glanced longingly at it and licked her lips. She was beginning to tire of drinking milk as well.

"When do you think we can hunt like that?" Whorl whispered.

"I hope soon," Chase replied.

"I'm afraid none of you will be hunting for a while," Copper explained, sitting beside his mate.

"Well, when will our coats be red like yours?" Pounce wondered.

"Not for a while either," Apple said in between her bites of meat.

Chase glanced at her darkened coat, looking forward to the day that it would glisten in the sun, just as her parents' did.

"Is it nice out today, dear?" Apple asked.

Copper nodded. "Nice breeze, a good amount of sunlight. Great day for hunting."

"Can we go outside?" Chase asked quietly.

They had been stuck inside the den for what felt like an eternity. Apple felt it was too dangerous for the kits to leave the den. She constantly warned the kits of the dangers that young foxes faced. Chase found it difficult to believe, considering that she had not faced an inch of danger in her life.

Whorl let out a whine beside her sister.

"Why don't you let them just sit outside the den for a bit?" Copper asked. "I can watch them."

Apple sighed. "I suppose I just don't want all of you growing up too fast. It can't hurt to step outside for a bit."

Chase wagged her bushy tail in excitement. She finally was going to see the outside world! Or outside the den at least.

"Follow me, kits," Copper said, stepping outside the den. "But *don't* wander off, you hear?!"

All five nodded and stepped outside with their father. As Chase's paw stepped onto soft grass, she winced, the sunlight nearly blinding her. As her eyes adjusted to the light, there was a sharp intake of breath.

The outside truly was beautiful. The sky was more blue than ever before while wisps of pale clouds floating through the sky. The grass was an even brighter green than Chase realized, and as she moved her paw over it, she felt how soft it was.

Immediately, Chase collapsed onto her back, rolling around in the grass. It smelled sweet, and there was just a slight scent of the forest air lingering on its thin strands. She glanced up at the trees overhead, noticing pink and white blossoms that had sprouted.

"Wow," Chase murmured in admiration.

A gust of wind knocked a few of those blossoms off the branches they clung onto, and one pink flower slowly drifted down until it landed on the tip of Chase's dark nose.

She glanced at it in awe before letting out a gigantic sneeze.

"It'll take some getting used to," Copper joked as Chase stood up again.

While their den was situated in a small meadow, she could see the mass of large, leafy trees in the distance and the faintest outline of mountains. She wondered what else laid ahead their little den.

I'll find out one day, Chase reminded herself.

She glanced around, realizing each of her siblings seemed to be taken aback as well. It only lasted a few seconds before they began wrestling each other again. Chase, though she loved to play, sat to the side, admiring the view.

"Isn't this a lovely forest?" Copper asked.

Chase nodded. "Will this be my home forever?" she asked.

"It can be," he told her.

Chase grinned, her paws itching with excitement. She couldn't wait to explore the forest one day.

"Is everyone behaving?!" Apple asked, peeking her head out of the den.

"They're right here, dear," Copper assured her.

"You didn't tell me the outside was so beautiful!" Chase exclaimed, running up to her mother.

Apple chuckled. "I suppose it's a bit difficult to explain in words. Besides, you've always been able to see outside the den."

"But I've never been able to feel the grass or sniff the air," Chase argued. She leaned forward and buried her head in her mother's warm chest.

"Chase, are you crying?" Apple asked, her tail brushing her daughter's side.

"I never want to leave this place," Chase murmured into her mother's white chest.

She felt Apple gently lick behind her ear. Chase glanced up and grinned at her mother before turning back around to take in the spring air.

"I'm afraid it's not always this nice, Chase," Apple murmured. "The

grass becomes brittle in the fall, and in the winter, everything is coated with snow."

"What's snow?" Chase murmured, still looking at the landscape.

Apple giggled. "I suppose you'll find out when you're older. You might even have a mate by then."

Chase tilted her head.

"Nevermind that. But I will warn you, even though it looks pretty, there are dangerous animals in the woods. Though nothing compares to the humans," Apple murmured quietly so that the other kits wouldn't hear.

"Humans?" Chase asked, the word foreign on her tongue.

"They stand upright on two legs and have no hair," Apple explained. "I don't want to scare you. We haven't had too many problems here. But sometimes...they kill foxes with scary sticks, and they sit in terrifying monsters on this loud road. Am I frightening you?"

Chase shook her head. She was well aware that there were dangers in the forest. While she enjoyed the view, even she was moving closer and closer to the den as Apple spoke to her.

"Promise me you will stay safe and not wander," Apple wondered.

Chase nodded. "I promise."

Chapter 2

"Can we go outside, *please*?" Chase begged her mother as the entire family awoke in the morning. She and Whorl had been excited to explore each morning, and with each coming day, her parents allowed them to wander just a little farther from the den.

"Let your mother sleep. I'll take you all outside," Copper said.

Chase's heart beat rapidly as she bounded out the entrance, finding yet another beautiful spring day. Her siblings all spread out and began playing while Copper kept an eye out from afar.

"Don't go any further than where you can see the den," Copper warned as the kits bounded off.

Chase nodded and began running through the grass. The air was getting warmer with each day. Her mother had told her all about how summer was coming, a time of warm days and plentiful prey. It seemed like a wondrous time to be alive in the forest.

Summer had not yet arrived yet, so for now, Chase admired the colorful petals of flowers and the multi-colored butterflies that drifted through the air.

Chase let out a screech of surprise as Whorl pounced on her. Chase giggled and batted at her sister, watching a butterfly that had landed on a flower nearby fly away.

"Let's catch that butterfly!" Whorl suggested, chasing after it.

Chase nodded and followed close behind, watching as her sister leapt into the air, trying to close her paws around the creature. It had flown too high though, and Whorl tumbled backwards.

Chase giggled.

"I almost had it," Whorl complained.

"Maybe another time," Chase teased, watching as the butterfly faded from view.

"I wish we could go past the den a bit more."

"Me too, but it's dangerous," Chase murmured.

"I wish they'd tell us what was so dangerous about it."

"I don't really want to find out," Chase confessed.

Whorl sighed and rose to her feet. "Well, let's head back closer to the den." She got up and turned, but a movement caused Chase to turn her head. She could hear a rustling sound coming from the other side of the bushes. Whorl seemed to have not noticed it, but Chase's curiosity got the better of her.

There was a tiny hole in the foliage that Chase peeked through. She crept down, shoving her tiny eye against it. What she saw shocked her.

All this time, her parents had told her of coyotes and badgers and humans as being a threat, but her eyes fell on a slim feline figure. It was unlike any creature she had seen before. The creature that Chase looked upon was a pure white animal with a slim build, dainty white paws, and sharp, pointed ears. The animal's nose was a brilliant pink and its eyes were a sparkling blue.

Chase knew she should leave, but she was entranced by this mysterious creature. She had never seen, or heard, of such a creature before. She was tempted to call out to it, but she only remained frozen in place.

"Chase, what are you doing?!" Whorl shouted behind her.

The creature, hearing the noise, quickly took off. Chase spun around, annoyed at her sister for scaring the creature off.

"What were you looking at?" Whorl asked, peeking through the hole.

"Nothing," Chase replied.

"Well, let's go back then," Whorl said, spinning around. Chase followed her sister back to the den, but all she could think about was that strange creature. She had never seen such a beautiful animal. Surely it couldn't be a dangerous looking like that.

Though Whorl was in a mood to play, Chase was too distracted by what she had seen, and she eventually curled up outside of the den in the sunlight, thinking to herself if there were other creatures like the one she had seen nearby.

"Everything okay, dear?" came a gentle voice.

Chase lifted her head and glanced up at her mother.

"I...I saw something," she said.

Apple's facial expression turned to one of concern. "What did you see?" she wondered.

"It was...I don't even know what it was," Chase said. "It was this small and thin white creature with pointed ears and long whiskers. I've never seen anything like it before."

Apple remained silent and made eye contact with Copper, who walked over.

"What's wrong?" Copper asked.

Apple turned back to her daughter now. "I believe you saw a cat, Chase."

"A cat?" Chase wondered. "I've never heard of them."

"They're not natural forest creatures," Copper grumbled.

"A lot of humans have them for pets, but some like to live in the woods," Apple explained.

"Why?" Chase asked.

"Who knows why? But they like to live in their little groups and steal all the prey," Copper grumbled.

"Is that true? Do they steal our prey?" Chase asked, suddenly growing worried.

"There's plenty to go around," Apple assured her. "But I wouldn't wander too close."

"Why? The creature looked barely bigger than me. You two are larger than it," Chase argued.

"Cats are nasty creatures," Copper growled. "I want them all out of the forest."

Apple shot her mate a look of annoyance and turned back to her daughter. "What he means is that cats can be dangerous. They will attack foxes if you wander too near their territory. And while one cat may not seem like too much trouble, a group of them fighting together can be."

"Oh," Chase said, growing quieter and less curious.

"While they may look pretty, I bet you didn't notice that cat's sharp claws or teeth. Thankfully, we are not too near their territory, so you don't need to worry about them," Apple assured her.

"Okay," Chase said.

"One day, I'll teach you how to kill them," Copper said. "Then this forest could be peaceful again."

"Copper, stop your rants," Apple growled.

Chase felt her stomach twist up. That didn't seem right. She knew her parents were only telling her this to warn her, but it didn't seem justified. If they had their own territory, wouldn't it make sense that they were trying to protect it?

Chase didn't feel like arguing with her parents. Instead, she accepted their word and went back to resting. Even as the day carried on though, all she could think about was that beautiful white cat with those shining blue eyes.

I don't care what they think, she told herself. *I'd love to be able to meet*

a cat one day. They seem like fascinating creatures.

Chapter 3

Chase couldn't help but continue to think about that beautiful white cat she had seen. Even if her parents had warned her about the dangers of such animals, she couldn't imagine how something that looked so lovely could also be so dangerous.

During playtime these days, Chase often strayed a bit farther than her siblings, hoping to catch a glimpse of that same cat again.

Unfortunately, she never saw another cat nearby, and her parents often scolded her for wandering too far.

"Chase, what are you doing?" Whorl inquired one day as Chase peered through some bushes.

"Nothing," Chase muttered.

"Come play with us!" Hop shouted.

"In a little bit," Chase said.

"Are you okay?" Whorl asked quietly.

Chase spun around to face her sister. "Of course!"

"Then, come over and play with us," Whorl said. "Why do you keep looking through that bush? Mom and Dad said nothing is going to come after us as long as they're around."

"I was...looking for something," Chase said, glancing at the bush again.

"What?" Whorl asked.

Chase paused for a bit, wondering if she could tell her sister. She desperately wanted to tell the others of the beautiful creature she had seen.

"I saw a cat," Chase said at last.

"A cat? I've never heard of such a thing," Whorl stated.

"It was beautiful, Whorl! It was this tiny and slim white creature with pointed ears and these striking blue eyes," Chase explained. "It had a soft pink nose and these long whiskers."

"Wow! I wish I had seen it!" Whorl exclaimed. "I've only ever seen squirrels and rabbits."

"But Mom told me to stay away from it. She said they could be dangerous," Chase stated.

"What's dangerous?" came a sudden sound near her.

Chase glanced up to see Hop and Pounce sitting nearby with Rush following behind.

"Nothing..." Chase knew she should have kept her mouth shut. Apple had not wanted her to tell the others of additional dangers in the forest.

"Chase saw a cat!" Whorl exclaimed.

Chase groaned. Apparently she should not have relied on Whorl to keep a secret.

"A cat? What's that?" Pounce asked.

Chase quietly explained to them the story again of how she had seen the creature passing by their territory the other day. All four of them seemed to be intrigued.

"Wow, do you think we'll ever see some?" Rush asked.

"I don't know..." Chase's voice trailed off. She wondered if she would get in trouble for talking about the encounter. Her eyes widened as she saw her parents padding forward. She let out a tiny whimper and hid behind her siblings as they came forward.

"Why are we all gathered over here?" Copper asked.

"Chase was telling us a story!" Hop shouted.

"About what?" Apple wondered innocently.

"She told us about the cat she saw," Whorl told her mother.

"Is that so?" Apple asked. "Chase, I see you hiding behind your brothers. Come out here."

Chase slowly moved past her brothers and glanced down as she approached her mother.

"Your father and I need to tell you about the cats," Apple said.

"They're nasty creatures, that's what they are," Copper grumbled.

"There are cats living near us in the forest, though we are separated a bit by our territories. They came to this forest and have made their own homes here. But they can be very dangerous, especially to young foxes," Apple warned.

"I'd fight them," Hop said.

"That's a good boy!" Copper encouraged. Apple shot her mate a look, and he quickly shut his mouth.

"But why? This is our land," Whorl stated.

"Yes, but they have entered the forest anyway. They will fight any fox that wanders too close to their territory. That's why you need to stay away and not look fondly at these cats," Apple warned, especially eyeing Chase.

"Wait, so they live together?" Pounce asked.

"That's right," Copper said. "They live in groups. I think there are two different groups near here. I've done my best to gather information about them."

"They're strange creatures," Apple added. "I heard that they have a leader, and that the members are called warriors. They're even skilled in medicine."

"Warriors..." Chase muttered. It was an interesting concept. She wondered how they got along with that sort of organized system. Being a fox was a bit more solitary. Chase bet it would be nice to live with other foxes besides just her family. She guessed that the cats were a lot less lonely.

"Promise you'll all stay away, okay?" Apple asked.

All five kits nodded, though Chase's mind kept wandering to the cats.

"Let me tell you something about those cats and them stealing what's rightfully ours," Copper said, beginning to go off on a rant that Chase quickly ignored.

Chase's mind wandered off as she considered what it would be like to be a warrior. She supposed that there were a lot more cats than just that one she had seen the other day. This thought only seemed to make her more excited.

I wonder what other colors they come in. Are they bigger and smaller too? What do their homes look like--

"Chase."

Apple's speech broke off Chase's thoughts. She glanced up at her mother. Concern shown in Apple's eyes.

"Promise you won't go near them, okay?" Apple asked.

"I promise," Chase said. Even if she was desperate to see a cat again, she valued her safety as well as the safety of her own family.

"That's a good girl. Come with me for a second," Apple said, leading her away from Copper and the others.

"What is it?" Chase asked.

"I want you to keep quiet about this around your siblings. It was bound to get out, but I don't want them worrying about cats as well. There are more threatening predators in the forest to think about, especially those humans. Let's agree not to talk about it, okay?"

Apple said.

"They just wanted to hear the story," Chase spoke quietly.

"We don't need to tell them those kinds of stories. If they ask about it again, just be quiet, okay?"

"Okay," Chase promised, though she felt her freedom had been restricted some.

"That's a good girl," Apple said, tracing her bushy tail under Chase's chin. "Now why don't you off and play with your siblings now?"

"Okay," Chase said, scampering off toward them. Still, she couldn't help but turn her head back toward that bush once more, wondering if there were cats lurking behind it.

Chapter 4

Chase's growling stomach woke her in the morning. She slowly opened her eyes, watching the light flood in their tiny den. She let out a tiny moan. She hadn't felt like she'd been properly fed in a few days, and it was beginning to take a toll on her.

Her parents had been bringing less and less prey back for them to eat. Chase knew her parents often gave the pups more than they ate themselves, but it didn't help to subside her hunger.

"Was that your tummy, dear?" Apple asked, poking her tail at Chase's stomach.

Chase giggled before her face grew grim, and she nodded.

Apple frowned. "I know. Prey has been harder to find lately."

"It's those cats," Copper growled, awaking as well. "We've got to do something about it. Our kits are going to starve."

"They're not going to starve," Apple growled, though Chase could hear some doubt in her voice.

The young fox quivered slightly at the thought of starving to death. She thought this time of year was when the prey was supposed to be the most plentiful. If they couldn't get prey now, then what would future seasons look like?

"I'm hungry," Rush complained.

"Maybe we should move," Apple suggested, looking at Copper.

"Not all will make it if we have to move to another forest," he said quietly, side-eyeing the five fox kits.

Chase tilted her head. What did he mean by those words?

"I can't find even a single mouse anywhere," Apple complained.

"We'll find a way to survive," Copper said. He finally turned and glanced at his children. "We'll make sure you get some food to eat."

"I'm going out to hunt, then," Apple said. "Maybe today will be luckier than the others."

Chase grinned, glad that she was finally going to get some food in her stomach.

"Why don't I take the rest of you outside to play?" Copper suggested.

Chase happily trotted outside with her siblings, hoping that playing would help her ignore her growling stomach.

"I hope she brings back some good food for us to eat," Whorl said, leaping at Chase.

Chase giggled and tackled her sister on the soft grass. "Me too. I'm so hungry," Chase replied.

Whorl knocked her sister off of her and pinned her down. She grinned, and her sharp white teeth glistened. Whorl suddenly removed her paws from Chase though and sat down.

"Are you okay?" Chase asked her sister.

Whorl glanced down at her paws, refusing to make eye contact.

"What if we can't get enough to eat? What if we die?" Whorl asked quietly.

"It wouldn't happen. Mom and Dad would make sure of that," Chase told her. "Besides, we'll learn to hunt soon enough. They won't have to worry about us anymore."

"I've never been this hungry before," Whorl spoke quietly. "Even if I'm not the one who dies, what if it's one of you guys?"

"It won't be," Chase assured her. She patted her bushy tail on her sister's shoulder and gave her a reassuring grin. Slowly but surely, Whorl began to smile again.

Chase pricked her ears suddenly, hearing hisses and yowls.

"What is that?" Whorl asked.

"Let's go look," Chase said, rushing toward the bushes.

"Wait!" Whorl called, remaining where she stood. "What if it's something dangerous? Copper said--"

"I'm checking it out anyway!" Chase called, rushing off toward the bushes. She heard footsteps behind her and found Whorl following.

The sounds only grew louder as they left the quaint meadow behind. Chase paused near a bush, realizing the sounds were coming from the other side of the foliage. She and her sister peeked their heads through a hole. What Chase saw led her to gasp.

Her mother had a dead rabbit in her mouth, though she was surrounded by angry cats on all sides.

Chase's eyes widened. She had only ever seen that white cat, but here, there were cats of many colors and sizes, ranging from black to a gray tabby and even a cat with a bright ginger pelt as well.

The cats were hissing and growling at Apple as they surrounded her, though Apple's muzzle was also drawn back as she snarled. Clearly she wasn't going to drop the prey without a fight.

"We should head back," Whorl whispered.

But Chase couldn't turn away. Her eyes were glued to the scene being laid out before her.

All at once, the cats leapt at Apple. With the prey still in her mouth, she knocked them off of her and did her best to bite and claw at them. Chase watched with horror as the cats ripped their claws into her mother's fur, leaving long streams of blood behind.

"Chase," Whorl whimpered.

But Chase couldn't move or speak. She watched as her mother continued to fight valiantly despite the sharp, needle-like teeth that

kept biting her limbs and the claws that ripped into her fur.

I wonder why the cats are mad, Chase thought. *Is it because of the prey?*

"Chase, we should get help," Whorl cried out, watching as more blood began to pour out from Apple.

"But Apple's strong. She'll--"

But even Chase could see that her mother was beginning to lose strength. Her teeth were still gripped around the rabbit, though Chase wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on.

"Chase, she'll *die*!" Whorl cried out.

Chase continued watching, silently begging her mother to overcome the cats or at least run away, but Apple continued to stand her ground, even as the cats continued giving her wounds.

"Okay, we'll--" Chase was cut off as she noticed Copper running forward in the distance.

"What are you kits doing?!" he exclaimed. He pricked his ears at the sound of the violent scene.

"What..." Copper's voice trailed off.

All of the sudden, Apple leapt through the bushes with the rabbit still in her jaws. Blood had soaked her pelt and was beginning to drop onto the ground with each step she took.

Chase widened her eyes as her mother ran past her. Apple glanced at her, a look of surprise coming over her.

She spit the rabbit out. "What are you two--"

Suddenly, her eyes began to roll to the back of her head, and she collapsed to the ground, blood beginning to pool around her.

"Mommy!" Whorl shrieked, shoving her paws against Apple.

Chase stood quivering as Copper rushed toward his mate.

"She's okay. She'll be okay," Copper said. "Chase, grab the prey."

Chase nodded, trying to ignore the stinging tears in her eyes. She picked up the rabbit and watched as Copper grabbed his mate by the scruff, dragging her back to the den.

Chase followed behind with the prey as Whorl whimpered and whined. She suddenly felt guilty for ever mentioning the fact that she was hungry.

When Copper finally did arrive back to the den, the other pups ran to their injured mother. Copper went to work to heal her, though he turned his attention to Chase.

"You share that rabbit with your siblings. And if I catch you wandering off like that again..." His voice trailed off, and he only sighed and went back into the den.

Chase had been starving earlier that day, but as she looked at the dead rabbit that her mother had worked so hard to get for her family, she suddenly lost her appetite.

As her other siblings ate away, her eyes absentmindedly glanced back to the den where her father was caring for her mother. She shut her eyes, now more aware than ever of the dangers of the forest.

Chapter 5

Chase leaned against the corner of the den and glanced down at her paws. Silence filled the air as her siblings slept beside her. Their fur was lightly brushing against her as she sat there, unable to successfully take an afternoon nap.

"Go to sleep, Chase," Copper said, noticing his daughter was awake.

"Is she...what if she wakes up?" Chase murmured.

Copper glanced down at his mate. Apple was thankfully recovering from her wounds, but she was still rather tired and drifting in and out of consciousness. Chase had been thrilled to learn that her mother would survive, but the days had been boring since the incident. Chase just wished her mother would be back to normal soon.

"Just try to sleep," Copper spoke quietly.

Chase sighed and laid down. Whorl twitched as Chase curled up beside her. She glanced forward at the scarred body of her mother. It was amazing to think that cats could cause such harmful injuries with those sharp claws of theirs.

Slowly, her eyes drifted shut, and while she never fully drifted into sleep, her mind went blank for a little while at least.

It was a few days later when Apple was finally awake and semi-mobile again. Her voice was weak, and she looked as if she'd aged several seasons in that time, but nevertheless, Chase was glad to have her mother back.

"Look, I brought you some flowers!" Whorl exclaimed, shoving some lilies at her feet.

Apple grinned. "Thank you, dear."

"Copper said we could bring you this big squirrel!" Hop explained while Pounce dropped the fresh prey in front of her.

"Thank you," Apple said, taking a bite.

The five kits sat around her, watching her intently. They all had been frightened by the idea of losing their mother, and they were all slowly feeling relieved again, even if the prey was still a bit difficult to find.

"I trust you ate the rabbit I caught," she said.

Copper nodded. "They gobbled it up, but you didn't have to go through the trouble to get it."

"I'm sorry to worry all of you," Apple admitted. "I really was just trying to look out for everyone."

"We can find prey somewhere else!" Rush suggested.

"I don't know about that, but we can certainly look harder," Apple suggested, giggling a bit.

"Now you know the true dangers of cats," Copper said, sitting down beside his mate.

"It's true. Those cats would've killed me if I hadn't gotten out of there," Apple explained. "And you two..." She turned her attention to Chase and Whorl.

Chase gulped. She had not yet been scolded for running off, but she supposed now that things were back to normal, a lecture was inevitable.

"You can't stray that far from the den," Apple warned. "You two could've wound up in the same situation, but those cats would've gotten you quicker."

Whorl gulped and nodded her head, though Chase wasn't convinced.

"You think so?" Chase wondered.

"They're vicious, Chase," Copper warned. "Stealing our land, our prey, killing our kind..."

"Maybe it's just a misunderstanding," Chase suggested.

"Chase," Whorl warned.

"A misunderstanding?" Copper asked before bursting out in laughter. "These cats are dangerous. You don't know a thing or two about them like *I* do."

"Well, it makes sense, doesn't it?" Chase suggested. "You wandered into *their* territory and took *their* food."

"But how else would I have fed you?" Apple mentioned.

"I'm sure they have hungry kits as well. And if there are a lot more, then they must need a lot of food to feed everyone. It really is just a misunderstanding."

"Don't try to twist the situation," Copper growled at his daughter. "There is no use in trying to reason with their kind. They nearly killed your mother."

"And how many have we killed?"

"Th-that's not important!" Copper said, stomping his foot down. "Where is this little act coming from? You're young. You don't know a thing about this forest."

"Copper, she's just curious," Apple muttered.

"I just don't think they're that bad. I think you could probably get along if you really tried," Chase suggested. "I think the humans are worse. Both cats and foxes are afraid of them.

"Let's go outside and play, kits," Copper said, cutting the conversation short.

Chase happily bounded toward the entrance of the den, only to be

stopped by her father.

"I don't know where this act is coming from, but you better drop it. Other foxes won't be so happy hearing you spew that stuff," Copper warned.

Chase nodded, though she didn't really take her father's words to heart. It just didn't seem right having such a prejudice against an animal that was just the same as them. She supposed she may have been more upset if her mother had actually been killed, but she knew that they were really just defending themselves.

Someone's got to change this way of thinking, she thought as she bounded off to play with her siblings.

As Apple slowly recovered, Copper was in charge of watching the kits from day to day. Though he had continued to warn about the dangers of the forest, he had grown quite loose in letting the kits wander around. Chase easily could leave the view of the den and not get in trouble.

One morning, she tumbled around with Whorl while her three other siblings were battling with each other. Chase glanced over at them just as Whorl pushed her to the ground.

"Got you!" Whorl teased.

Chase giggled and stood up, turning her head to the distance.

"What are you looking at?" Whorl wondered.

"Nothing," Chase told her. The wind was blowing in that direction, causing the leaves of the trees and bushes to dance. She wondered if there were cats that way...

"You know Copper said we can't wander off," Whorl warned, already noticing that look of adventure reflecting in Chase's eyes. "He's already mad that you're talking about cats like that."

"Oh, he doesn't know what he's talking about," Chase grumbled.

"Yes, he does! And you should listen to him!"

"It's *fine,*" Chase grumbled.

"Great, now you're mad at me," Whorl complained.

"I'm not!" Chase argued, her fur spiking. She sighed and sat down. "I'm going to sit out for a little bit."

"Well, okay..." Whorl took off to play with the rest of her siblings while Chase sat in the grass.

Her father was napping near the den while the other four were occupied with their games. She turned her head back to the trees and the bushes. It wasn't as if anyone would notice if she slipped off for just a second.

She quickly glanced in the way of her siblings and took off, bounding toward the bushes. She left the view of the den in moments and was wandering deeper into the forest. Chase glanced around, taking in the serenity of nature. She wished her parents would let her wander a bit more. She couldn't wait until she was older and had the whole forest to explore.

As Chase walked along the rough forest floor, she heard the sound of a twig cracking to the left of her. She froze and crouched down behind a rock. What she saw surprised her. A large male cat with gray stripes was walking in the distance. Chase gulped, wondering if she should really just listen to her parents and keep her distance, but curiosity got the best of her.

It was amazing to her how unique each cat looked. She had never seen one that looked like this before. If foxes and cats were truly to coexist in the forest, she thought she'd at least try to interact.

Chase slowly moved away from the rock and crept closer to the cat wandering through the forest. "Excuse me!" she yelled.

The cat spun around, his eyes widening on Chase.

"Oh, sorry, I don't mean to scare you," she said, standing in place. "My family lives by here. I think your kind attacked my mother not too long ago. She stole your prey, I know that."

The cat was staring at her oddly, though he didn't advance. He stood there, looking at her in awe as she continued to speak.

"I'm Chase. I want to be friends with the clan cats. Er, what's your name? And what's your clan?"

There was a silence that settled between them.

"Are you deaf? I think you can hear me just fine," Chase muttered, rubbing her paws in the dirt.

The cat stared at her with his green eyes and let out a quiet mew.

"What?" Chase asked.

The cat opened its mouth again, meows and other odd sounds coming out. Chase tilted her head, unable to understand what the cat was trying to communicate. It was only when she saw him slowly advancing with unsheathed claws that she spoke again.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I must've wandered too far into your territory." And with that she took off, rushing back to the den.

How odd, she thought. *We don't speak in the same tongue at all.*

A part of her heart sunk realizing this. She supposed it made the most sense, but a part of her thought that maybe their communication would be the same. She supposed it would just be harder trying to create a good relationship with the cats nearby.

As she bounded up the hill toward the meadow where the den sat, Whorl nearly ran into her.

"Where have you been?!" Whorl gasped, picking leaves out of Chase's fur. "Copper just woke up, and I covered for you. You weren't in cat territory, were you?"

"It's weird. We don't even speak the same language," Chase muttered.

"You tried to *talk* to one?!"

"What's wrong with that?" Chase asked.

Whorl sighed. "I won't mention it, but just...don't do it again."

"Thanks," Chase called as she returned back to the others. Still, she caught one last gaze back at the forest behind her. Who was that cat? And how would she ever be able to really speak with one?

Chapter 6

"Have you been exploring recently?" Whorl whispered to Chase one day.

"Of course!" Chase exclaimed.

Whorl narrowed her eyes. "You know we're not supposed to wander, Chase."

"I don't stray too far. I know where the boundaries lie," Chase argued.

Chase noticed a sudden presence behind her and turned around to see Rush, her other sister. The smaller fox was staring at her with curiosity as she listened in on the two sisters' conversation.

"Where do you go?" Rush asked.

"Uh, nowhere," Whorl answered.

"Into the woods, a little bit away from the meadow," Chase explained. "There's a lot to do and see, and Copper is too busy napping to realize I'm gone."

Rush snickered. "Would you show me? I get tired playing in the meadow all day."

"Chase, we're not supposed to wander," Whorl warned.

"Then cover for us while I show her," Chase said to her sister before leading Rush away. She heard Whorl growl in response, but when Chase turned her head, she saw Whorl returning to the meadow.

Rush moved slower than Chase, probably frightened that trouble would come her way, but Chase had been wandering around enough that she knew her parents wouldn't catch her. It was hard to

keep track of five foxes, after all.

They moved away from the tall grasses of the meadow, moving deeper into the forest. Chase grinned as Rush looked around in wonder at the world around her.

"It's so big!" Rush exclaimed.

"It's nice, isn't it? Soon we can go as far as we want!" Chase exclaimed, running forward and climbing up a nearby rock. She peered forward, knowing that the cat territory was in the distance. Her heart sunk to see there were no cats nearby, but she felt proud being able to determine where the boundaries in the forest laid.

"What are you looking for?" Rush wondered.

"Nothing," Chase responded, leaping down from the rock. "This is as far as I usually go though."

"But it looks like there's so much more in the distance," Rush complained.

"I like breaking the rules, but not *that* much. You shouldn't wander either. I've come here enough to know where I am, but you might get lost if you keep walking around. Let's head back," Chase suggested.

Rush nodded, though she looked a bit disappointed to see that their journey had been cut short. Chase wished she could comfort her sister, but even she had her own limits about how far she decided to go.

"I really like the forest," Rush admitted as they came back to the meadow. Their siblings were rolling in the grass as Copper and Apple snoozed near the entrance of the den.

Chase nodded.

"I wish we didn't have to wait until we were older to go off exploring," Rush complained.

"It's for the best," Chase guessed. "If you need me to take you again

sometime, let me know."

"Thanks," Rush responded, giving her a kind smile.

A shriek split the air in the middle of the night. Chase awoke with a jolt, watching as the others stirred beside her. The sky was still dark, and the scream had now vanished, being replaced chirping crickets.

"What was that?" Whorl murmured, her eyes widened in fear.

Her parents were already stepping outside, and it was with a shock that Chase realized Rush wasn't normally sleeping next to her. She let out a gasp and stepped outside.

"Chase, go back inside!" Copper growled. "It could be dangerous."

"Rush isn't in the den!" Chase exclaimed.

Her parents both exchanged views of concern, and even Chase could detect the fear in their eyes. Apple quietly escorted Chase back inside, telling her to remain quiet, while Copper went to investigate.

The others fell back asleep in no time, but Chase sat up, nervously awaiting Copper's return. She felt like she was somehow connected to Rush's disappearance, and she regretted ever leading her into the forest. What if something had happened? What if Rush was lost forever? What if...She let her thoughts wander off, trying to assure herself that everything would be okay. She shut her eyes, pretending she was asleep so as not to worry her mother who was keep a vigilant watch near the entrance of the den.

When she heard the sound of footsteps, she glanced up again, jumping as her mother let out a startled cry. The others were waking again, asking around about what had happened.

Chase crept near the entrance of the den slowly and slowly peeked through. Her stomach grew nauseous with what she saw. Rush lay limp on the ground, her beautiful pelt coated in dried blood. Thin, long clawmarks lay across her pelt which Chase realized could only from come a cat.

"She's dead," Copper muttered.

They buried Rush in the morning. Everyone was crying, though Chase felt empty inside. She had never been too close with Rush, even though she was her sister, but she felt responsible for her death. Rush had clearly gone out to explore, even though Chase explicitly told her to ask her first. She had neglected to mention this to her parents as the guilt ate her up inside.

Chase knew it was uncommon for all of the fox kits to live into adulthood. She'd heard stories from her parents about their siblings who were deceased early on into their life. But a part of her wanted to believe that her family would all remain alive and thrive as Chase grew.

Perhaps her mother's wounds had healed, but it appeared fresh ones had opened as Apple quietly wept near the fresh dirt of her daughter's grave.

"Don't go out again," Whorl begged Chase quietly.

Chase nodded, though she doubted she'd listen. She knew where the cats lurked, and Rush had clearly wandered too far into their territory.

"I'll kill every last clan cat on the planet," Copper muttered, digging his claws into the dirt.

"Stop it, dear," Apple muttered.

"It wasn't their fault," Chase spoke up.

Copper turned to his daughter, looking at her as if she had betrayed him with her words.

"They killed her, Chase," Hop whimpered.

"She wandered into *their* territory," Chase argued. "Maybe she didn't know it was their territory, but she was a threat to them."

"She was only a kit," Apple cried.

"It was unjustified," Copper growled.

"If a kitten had wandered into our territory, I bet you would have killed it immediately, wouldn't you?" she asked her father.

He growled at her. "This is no time for questions like this! Why are you acting as if you *know* these cats? Your sister is dead! Do you feel absolutely nothing?"

"I'm sad, but...I also understand."

"You're making no sense, Chase. They killed her," Whorl said quietly.

"You would've killed a kitten if it had wandered too close to our den. That's why they killed Rush. Because one day she was going to grow into a big fox that would hurt them. I saw how scared they look when they were fighting Apple. They're scared of us, but they hide it with violence. And we're scared of them, even if they're smaller than us," Chase explained.

"Chase, go inside," Copper growled. "I don't want to hear anymore about this."

She nodded and stepped inside the den. She didn't mean to disrespect Rush's death, but she wished her family would understand. This wasn't an act of hatred. It was a natural part of the food chain. The cats were longing to protect their kind just as Chase's parents were longing to protect them.

She wished the world could understand the balance of the forest.

Chapter 7

Chase's family felt broken now that Rush had gone. Chase no longer mourned her sister. She had barely gotten along with her in the first place. But Apple and Copper were still mourning, and her siblings were always quick to notice that there was one missing from their playtime sessions.

The only benefit that came from Rush's demise was that Apple and Copper were a bit too upset to notice when Chase and the others snuck off a bit farther from the meadow. Chase sometimes felt guilty, especially since she knew this was how Rush had been killed, but she knew the boundaries well, and she knew never to step into cat territory.

One day, the four kits bounded in the meadow as Apple rested inside and Copper went hunting. Chase's eyes continually stared off into the distance, where the woods got denser. It had been a while since she'd gone back. She'd only ventured there once or twice since Rush's death.

"Chase, don't," Whorl warned quietly.

"What?" Chase asked innocently.

"I know you want to wander off, but you shouldn't. Mom and Dad are still upset about Rush. You don't want them to worry about you, too."

"But I knew the boundaries better than Rush," Chase explained.

"It doesn't matter what you know or think. I still hear Copper whispering about you. He doesn't like what you said," Whorl murmured.

"I wasn't trying to say Rush should have died. I was only pointing out facts."

"He doesn't like that you think differently," Whorl explained.

"Then...fine. I won't wander," Chase decided, figuring Whorl would be tempted to snitch.

She subjected herself to a game of wrestle with Whorl and her brothers, even if she wished she was standing on a rock and peering into the forest to get a glimpse of those beautiful cats. She had not seen one in such a long time. Sometimes they haunted her dreams. She often daydreamed about the conversations she would have with one if they spoke the same language.

"Hey, Dad's back!" Pounce exclaimed.

Chase turned her head as Copper moved up the hill. Her heart frowned to see no prey in his mouth. Her stomach was already beginning to growl.

Her eyes narrowed as she noticed something small moving through the grass with him. She tilted her head, cautiously approaching. The others were already rushing to greet their father, though they paused when they noticed the creature at his feet.

"Dad, what is *that*?" Whorl gasped.

Chase pushed past her siblings and froze. There was a tiny brown tabby kitten at his feet. Its yellow eyes were widened in fear as it stood in the grass. Chase could see its tiny legs shaking.

"I found this little thing in the territory," Copper said. "It's a cat."

"That's what they look like?" Pounce asked. "How could something that small kill Rush?"

"It's a *kitten,*" Chase told her brother impatiently. "That's not their adult size."

"Why is it here?" Whorl wondered. "I thought you were hunting."

"I was, but it seemed that this little kitten wandered too far from home." The kitten turned, about to launch its legs to escape, but Copper's paw on its back kept it from going anywhere.

"What are you doing with it?" Chase asked. "It's obviously wandered too far. We can bring it back."

"Why should we? Their kind killed Rush. I have a different idea," Copper said. His voice took on a sadistic tone that shook Chase to the core.

"Let's just take it back," Chase said quietly.

"We're going to go in the forest, all four of us. Hop, go tell your mother I'll be taking you on a little hunting trip, but don't mention our guest," Copper instructed.

Her brother bounded off. Chase paused and glanced down at the kit. She'd never seen so much fear built up inside one being before. She gave it a gentle stare, but each time the kit looked at her, she could sense its silent pleas for help.

"Dad, what are you going to do with it?" Chase whispered, not wanting to dive into the possibilities already forming in her head.

Copper ignored her. "Follow me," he said. He led them into a part of the forest that Chase had never seen before. They walked alongside the border that separated their territory from the cats until they came to another clearing that was far from their homely meadow.

"This isn't where the clan cats live," Chase muttered to herself.

The kit was letting out tiny mews that rang in her ears. It was the cry of prey that was surrounded by predators.

"Let me share with you a story of vengeance," Copper said. His paw was holding down the mewling kit. His claws were gently pressing into its fur, but he was not striking.

Her siblings were staring with intensity, but Chase's eyes could only fall on her dark paws.

"Your sister was taken from you unfairly. When I found this kit today, I knew the universe was in my favor. Now is the chance to get our revenge on the cats. They have stolen too much from us. First it was the prey, but then it was someone dear to us."

"Dad," Chase spoke quietly, her voice beginning to tremble.

"It was too easy to do on my own. I thought I'd give all of you a lesson. It'll help with hunting too. I want all four of you to kill this kit. You'll know the glory of feeling its blood on your paws," Copper announced.

"Dad, no!" Chase shouted.

He ignored Chase's cries as the three readied themselves.

"Come here," Chase," Copper commanded.

She slowly approached, standing nearby her siblings.

"I'll let go on the count of three, and then you'll all attack," Copper said.

As Chase glanced at her siblings, she noticed the excitement in their eyes whereas she felt sick to her stomach. They looked like bloodthirsty predators who killed only for the thrill.

"I can't," Chase cried out.

"You will!" Copper growled at his daughter. "One..."

Chase's vision was growing blurry. She could save the kit, maybe...

"Two..."

Her paws were frozen though. How would she even be able to save the kit when there were four other foxes that easily could steal it back? She wasn't sure the clan cats would be thrilled to have her gently returning the kit in their territory.

"Three..."

Her time was up. She hadn't acted in time.

Copper lifted his paw up, and the three sprang into action. Chase was frozen, watching as sharp claws tore into the skin of the kitten. She winced and spun around, her tail between her legs. Its cries

filled the air. She knew it was calling for help, even if she couldn't understand the language.

"Chase," she heard her father's growl. "Come here and stain your paws."

Her limbs were trembling as she heard the clashing of teeth, sharp growls, and mewling. Tears stung her eyes. She could not turn around.

"No," Chase said quietly.

All at once, it went silent. She knew the kitten had died. Suddenly, she felt a warm fluid running against her paws. She glanced down, watching as a trail of blood leaked across the ground.

Chase spun around. Her siblings looked invigorated. Their eyes were widened in some sort of high as they looked at each other proudly. Their muzzles were stained with hot blood, and their paws were drenched in thick fluid.

Copper marched up to his daughter, rage in his eyes.

"Why didn't you join?" he snarled.

"How could you do it?!" Chase exclaimed, choking on her tears. "How could any of you have done that?!"

"The cats killed Rush," Whorl answered.

"But that kitten didn't! Did those sounds not pain you? It was suffering!" Chase exclaimed, her breath growing rapid. She was nearly wheezing.

"You're going to die soon if that's your attitude," Copper growled. "One day, you will have to stain your paws with blood. You'll have to kill a cat when it threatens one of your own."

"I won't," Chase said. "I won't kill a cat."

She yelped as Copper's claws slashed across her face. Gasps sounded from her sibling. Pain was already growing in her cheek, and

droplets of blood began streaming down the side of her muzzle.

"You'll do as you're told!" he shouted.

"That kitten was lost! It had a *family*! They're going to be heartbroken when they learned what you did to it. That's not how the world should work. You killed it for no reason but revenge. You're all monsters," she said.

"Anyone who shows sympathy to an animal that killed her family is a monster," Copper responded. "And you're going to let that wound heal naturally. I wish it'd leave a scar to remind you of your stubbornness."

"I'll tell Mom," Chase said quietly.

"You will not!" Copper responded. "Or else you have another wound waiting for you." He turned and looked at his other children. "Not a word to your mother, understand?"

The other three nodded their heads vigorously.

"I feel disgusting," Chase breathed, even if her paws hadn't even touched the kit. Why hadn't she just jumped in and saved it like she initially considered? Why had she stood there like a coward as its dying cries filled the air?

"Let's go," Copper said, kicking the kit's dead body away.

Chase expelled the contents of her stomach not too long after.

"Not a word about this," Copper warned, stepping on her paw. She yelped and nodded.

He led the other three kits while Chase kept some distance behind. Her muzzle wound still stung. She'd have to think of a good excuse before Copper gave her another.

Chase's legs were still weak, and her tail was tucked between her legs. She never wanted to witness anything like that in her life again. When she looked ahead, she barely even noticed her family anymore. They were something darker in her eyes now.

Chapter 8

Everyone else in her family had gone about their lives normally, as if they hadn't murdered an innocent animal just for the fun of it. But Chase could not shake the image of the kit's dead body from her vision.

Her father had made Chase's siblings wash their sticky paws off in the river while kept her distance, trying not to cry out or run away. Her father continued to emphasize that she not tell, and scared of his wrath, Chase obeyed.

Chase's relationships with her siblings had been strained since that day. She no longer cared much for playing alongside them and often took off on her own or remained in the den to rest.

Her mother had noticed and thought perhaps Chase had fallen ill, but Chase assured her mother that she was fine, even if she felt like she was carrying a dark secret inside her. She couldn't bear to look her father in the eyes most days.

Chase finally gathered the courage to go outside one day in the midst of the rest of her family. The air had grown hotter with the coming summer season, though today it was overcast, creating a sticky, humid atmosphere.

Chase crept through the long grass, watching as her three other siblings wrestled in the distance. Copper was resting near a boulder as he kept watch.

Chase took a step forward, as if to engage in play with her siblings, but all she could see was their bloodstained paws and sharp teeth. She shuddered, and turned away, beginning to edge toward the forest.

"Chase, come here!" Copper barked.

She sighed and spun around, walking toward her father with her

tail between her legs. He looked unhappy as soon as she approached.

"What?" Chase grumbled.

"Quit going off," he told her.

"You noticed?" Chase asked, though she wasn't very surprised. She had been less cautious about making sure she wasn't noticed since the incident. It didn't really matter to her if the others knew or not. She was getting older and soon wouldn't need constant vigilance.

"Of course I do. I've noticed for a while," Copper argued.

"Why didn't you stop me?" she wondered.

"You always came back. Just play with your siblings for once," her father encouraged.

"I don't want to. I'd rather go wander in the woods," she told him, avoiding eye contact.

"What? To see those cats again?" he growled.

"I don't see anything. I just like exploring," Chase argued as she began to turn her body.

"Don't forget those cats killed your sister!"

"I didn't forget," Chase said simply.

Copper let out a low growl. "I'm getting tired of this charade you're putting on. You're a *fox*. It's time for you to act like one. Killing is a part of life."

"Killing for the thrill of it isn't," she murmured.

"It was *revenge*."

"It was *wrong*!" Chase shouted, lashing her tail. "I'm going to go."

"Fine! Go frolic in the woods! I'm not coming after you when you call for help," Copper growled.

Chase fully turned around and ran off through the grass until the thick woods of the trees engulfed her. She took her familiar route until she found a small rock to rest on. She knew for a fact that this rock overlooked some of the clan territory, and she'd been lucky enough to get a view of a few cats every once in a while.

Slowly, Chase stretched out on the rock and gazed forward at the forest ahead. She'd kept her distance from this place for a while after assuming multiple patrols would be sent out to look for the missing kit. She feared witnessing mourning parents when the body was eventually found.

But Chase couldn't stay away too long. A part of her just needed to catch a glimpse again of one of those beautiful cats.

A rustle of the bushes made her turn her head. There were two cats walking side by side: a pregnant silver she-cat and a dark brown tom. She gazed at them curiously and listened as they mewed at each other.

Seeing the she-cat's semi-swollen stomach made Chase frown as she thought of the kit again that her father had shown no mercy too. She hoped this she-cat would be vigilant when caring for her kits.

The two continued mewing at each other in a language Chase could not understand. She let out a sigh, wishing she could one day she could speak to cats. But how would she even begin? There was a huge language barrier that she doubted she'd ever be able to overcome.

I want to apologize, Chase thought. *I want to apologize for the death of that kit.*

She realized that the forest would never be peaceful if the two predators did not learn to live together, and a part of her *longed* to achieve this type of relationship.

Whatever twisted mentality Copper had tried to instill in her mind had not worked. Chase continued to grow more interested in cats as the days passed, hence her ever-growing visits to this part of the forest.

She just wished her siblings had not been brainwashed by her obnoxious father. A part of her wondered if Apple would listen to her, but Apple was a mother and probably wanted to make sure her remaining kits were safe.

No one will ever understand me, Chase lamented to herself.

The cats were soon out of view, and tiny droplets of rain followed soon after their disappearance. Chase sighed and hopped down from her rock as her pelt slowly became dampened by the rain.

She walked slowly back, then quickened her pace as she realized her siblings had probably already gone into the den to get some shelter. The rain began to pour as she finally made it back to the den, and as she guessed, her entire family was already inside.

"Where were you?" Apple asked.

Chase opened her mouth, desperate to come up with an excuse, but Copper silenced her.

"They were playing hide-and-seek from me, and I couldn't find her as I rallied up the others. Looks like she realized the game was over," Copper offered.

Chase turned to look at him, confused as to why he was covering for her. Perhaps he just wanted her out of his fur. If Apple knew Chase went off, she'd never let Chase leave the den again.

Apple ushered Chase forward to warm her up, though even with her mother's fur pressed against her, Chase felt further from her family than ever before.

"Everything okay?" Apple asked quietly. "You've been very quiet."

"Just tired," Chase murmured. Her other siblings shot her looks and began to snicker, but Chase no longer cared. This den no longer felt as warm and cozy as before.

Chapter 9

Chase was napping when her father marched in with his head held high. He was growling up a storm about some trespassers in the area, and Chase could only assume he meant the cats until she finally began to eavesdrop on his low grumbling.

"Foxes nearby," Copper mumbled. "I can smell them coming into our territory and spreading their filthy scent everywhere."

"Are they very close?" Apple asked, her voice echoing with worry.

Chase tilted her head. Did her father just not enjoy any animals in general? These were their own kind, and he was still ranting up a storm about how it was *their* territory and besides the cats, now they had to deal with foreign foxes.

"You kits stay together and let us keep a close eye on you," Apple said to Chase and her siblings as Copper finished his rant.

"Why is it dangerous?" Whorl asked curiously.

"Maybe we could play with some more kits," Pounce suggested.

Apple shook her head. "We don't know these new foxes yet. They could be aggressive and want to claim this territory for themselves. And they'll go straight for the tiny ones first," she said, staring at the four of them. "I don't want anyone to end up like..." Her voice drawled off as Chase knew she was thinking about Rush.

The four promised they'd all stay nearby and remain under vigilance by their parents, but Chase couldn't have cared less. She and her siblings were growing more and more each day. Chase's pelt had begun to change from a dark brown to a beautiful, golden red.

It was summer, and the forest was more alive than ever. Chase wanted nothing more than to explore. And if she met some more

foxes, that would be a bonus too. She'd been rather lonely since keeping her distance from the rest of her family members.

Copper, as always, promised to be attentive, but she caught him sleeping away mere minutes into playtime. Chase spun around, ready to head to her normal spot to watch the cats go by, but her paws also itched to run into some new faces.

She frowned, looking left and right, before deciding to head in a different direction today. She left the confines of the golden meadow and moved under the shady protection of the trees.

The lack of sunlight felt good on her pelt, especially with the weather so hot. She had to be careful to not wander too far since she was exploring a different part of the woods today. This side of the forest was darker and lacked the interspersed glints of sunlight, but it was new, mysterious, and excited her.

A trickling brook could be heard flowing in the distance. She perked her ears up and followed the sound, desperate for a cool drink on a hot day. As she grew closer, she could hear an odd noise in the distance. It was familiar to her from afar, but she wasn't sure how.

Chase knew her parents would advise her to turn back if she was hearing strange sounds, but her curiosity got the better of her. The young vixen slowly crept forward to the brook, listening as the sounds got closer.

They were recognizable now. The sounds coming off the animals' tongues belonged to cats. She was surprised she had not realized who the mews belonged to earlier.

That was strange. She didn't think this part of the forest was a part of the cat's territory. Remembering the fate her sister had met, she crept down in the brush as she got to the brook's edge.

She slowly lifted her face up to peer past the green foliage. Chase wondered what the cats before her looked like. As her eyes scanned the scene in front of her, she paused.

There was one cat on the opposite side of the brook. He was a large

brown tom cat, and his voice was gruff as he spoke. But his companion was not of his own kind. Standing next to the tomcat was a young male fox, or a tod. He was older than Chase as he had already reached full size and had a blazing red pelt, but he could not be older than more than one cycle of seasons. He still looked rather youthful.

The two were conversing purely in cat tongue. Chase froze as she watched from afar. How was it possible? Were her eyes deceiving her? There was surely a fox in front of her.

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. Perhaps she was still too loyal to her parents. They had forbade her from interacting with both cats and mysterious foxes, so she shut her mouth and witnessed the spectacle.

The two said a few more words to each other before they took off in opposite directions. Chase watched the tod disappear into the foliage on the other side. How was it that he knew how to speak to cats? Was that something acquired with time? Was there some innate disposition toward being able to speak in other tongues?

Chase's head begin to hurt from the thoughts whirling through her head. Not wanting to get lost, she decided not to pursue the fox and turned away, heading back to the meadow. Her father was just waking when she arrived.

"Running off again?" he muttered.

"Like you care," Chase replied.

It was not until a few days later that Chase began to hear more about the new foxes that had entered their territory. Copper arrived back from a hunting spree with fresh prey and new information.

His entire mood toward the newcomers had shifted dramatically. Copper was full of pride as he entered the den.

"I just met one of the new foxes," he said triumphantly.

Apple tilted her head. "Weren't we not going to speak with them?"

"I'm a large tod. I could have fought them if I needed to. Anyway, they have no interest in moving too close to us. It's a family that's traveled together. There are about five of them in total, and a few young foxes who might make promising mates," Copper added.

"Mating season isn't even until the winter," Apple added. "They're too young to--"

"I just meant that in the future they won't have to scramble around trying to find another fox. We should make good relations with them. Maybe they'll help us get rid of those stupid cats," Copper growled.

Chase narrowed her eyes. Copper had only befriended the foxes for his own gain, not for any of theirs. Yet she figured the cat-speaking fox had to be among the newcomers. She'd just have to go along with Copper's plans for now.

"They might be around sometimes. I told them that they could wander into our territory now and again," Copper added.

"Are you sure it's safe?" Apple asked.

Copper nodded vigorously. "Completely safe. They were offering to share their kill with me by the time I left. We foxes need to stick together in times of difficulty. I think this will be good for all of us."

"When can we meet them?" Chase asked after a period of silence. The others turned to look at her, surprised she'd talked. It had been the first time she'd contributed to a family conversation in several sunrises.

Chapter 10

Chase milled around the meadow as she normally did, watching her siblings play in the distance. There was a time when she had once joined them, but she now found company mostly in herself.

She took one last glance at her family before heading into the woods as she normally did. She had been lucky enough to have glances of cats nearly every day now that the days were hotter and prey was plentiful. Of course, this also meant she couldn't head into the woods as often, for fear the cats would be angered by her wandering so near the territory.

Chase walked alongside the river, noticing its plentiful stream of water was slowly diminishing with the lack of rain. To amuse herself, she leapt on the pebbles lining the water. She hopped happily, wondering if she'd be able to get a peak of the cats' territory up ahead, but her foot suddenly slipped, and she let out a yip in surprise.

"Careful," a voice said across the river.

Chase turned her head, freezing. The same male fox she had seen earlier was sitting across the river, staring at her. She had no idea how long he'd been there, but he'd obviously seen her slip.

"I am being careful," she argued.

She watched the mysterious fox cross across the river by stepping carefully on the exposed stones. Chase gulped and moved away from the river's edge as he approached her.

"You seem a bit too young to be wandering around the forest alone," he told her.

"I'll be fully grown in no time," she argued. "You don't look much older."

He chuckled. "I've already lived through the seasons once. Are you one of the foxes living here? My family and I are new."

"Yes," she answered.

"I picked up your scent while hunting. I noticed it earlier as well. You pass through these parts often. Where's the rest of your family?" he wondered.

"Down in the meadow."

"And why aren't they here with you?"

"I like exploring myself," Chase argued.

"And your parents let you?"

"Yes..."

"I'm Yew," he said.

"Chase."

"Chase?" he asked, tilting his head. "That's an interesting name. It's unique. I like it."

"Oh, thanks," she replied, staring off in the distance so she wouldn't have to maintain eye contact with him. This was the first time she'd ever come in contact with a fox who didn't belong to her family.

"So why do you explore over here?" Yew wondered. "I know my parents wouldn't have let me wander on my own."

"Because I want to. My family and I don't get along so well these days."

"Why not?"

"We just don't," Chase said, lifting her nose in the air.

"Well, my family and I just moved here. Humans were lurking too close to our nearby territory. We'd love to meet your family sometime."

"How many of there are you?" Chase wondered.

Yew tilted his head. "Let's see...there's my parents, my grandfather, and my two siblings. I guess we're somewhat of a big bunch. How about you?"

"It's just me, my parents, and my three other siblings. I think they want to get to know your family as well."

"Then, let me walk you back, and I can meet them," Yew offered.

"Wait," Chase said as he turned to head toward the meadow.

"What is it?" he wondered.

"Who was the cat you were speaking to? Did you really understand him?" she asked.

Yew turned and laughed. "It must've been your ears I saw peeking up from behind the bushes."

Chase crouched down. "I'm sorry. I was eavesdropping, not that I could make out anything you were saying."

"It's no wonder I keep picking up your scent around here. Were you hoping to run into me again?"

"N-No!" she stammered.

"My grandfather, Claw, is proficient in cat tongue. He grew up living near some cats and learned to converse with them. They belonged to humans and warned him and his family of what the humans were planning to do to their territory. He taught it onto my parents and me. Of course, I'm the only one who's kept up practice. I suppose it'll come in handy with all the cats that live around here."

"You can speak to them?" she asked, simply shocked.

Yew nodded. "Yup. Their words are as clear as day to me."

"But who were you speaking to?" Chase wondered.

"Just a loner passing through. He was asking for directions. I told him he better head away from the warrior clans before they attacked him. He thanked me and told me of some good hunting spots. I haven't seen him since."

"Warriors clans?"

"Yeah, that's what the cats around here call themselves. Warriors. And they live in something called clans. We had some in our old territory, though they weren't as close."

"Did you get along well with them?" Chase wondered.

Yew shrugged. "All right, I guess. They were a bit too far to cause any issues."

"I don't think the cats should be our enemies," Chase said. "But my family thinks otherwise."

"Are cats a problem here?" he wondered.

"I don't think they would be if we talked to them. I think their way of life is fascinating. I come over here to catch glimpses of them," Chase explained.

"Better be careful. Even if they're smaller than you, they're mighty ferocious."

"I know that!" Chase said, digging her claws into the ground. "That's just what I think."

Yew tilted his head. "I think my grandfather would like you. I'll have to introduce you to him someday. Would you be willing to show me the way to the meadow now?"

Chase sighed and nodded, leading him past the brush and foliage until they came to the grassy meadow. Her siblings were still playing while her mother and father napped outside the den.

At the sight of a mysterious fox, her brothers and sister froze, glancing up.

"Who's this?" Whorl asked.

"Someone new to play with!" Hop gasped, running forward.

Their cries awoke their parents. Chase watched as Copper and Apple slowly lifted their heads, glancing at the stranger.

"And who are you?" Copper asked, marching forward in a defensive stance.

"I'm one of the new foxes around here," Yew explained. "Your daughter told me you wanted to meet me, so she led me here."

"Oh, well, forgive me. I don't want anything happening to my kits. Already lost one earlier this year. It was difficult," Copper grumbled.

"I'm so sorry," Yew said sympathetically.

"Ah, it's expected. The others are doing well. I see you've met Chase," Copper said, shooting a glare at her.

Chase frowned, wondering how introducing her parents to one of the foxes they wanted to get acquainted with was a bad thing.

The others kits ran forward to greet Yew.

"This is my other daughter, Whorl, and then we have Hop and Pounce," Copper explained. "I'm Copper, and this is my mate, Apple."

"Nice to meet you," Yew said, dipping his head.

"I hope Chase hasn't filled your brain with any wacky ideas," Copper offered.

Yew blinked. "Huh? She's done nothing of the sort."

"Why don't we all go inside the den to speak?" Apple asked, trying to break up the awkwardness. "We'd love to get to know you, Yew, and the new foxes in this area."

"Sure," he said.

"I'm going to stay outside," Chase announced.

"Yeah, yeah," Copper muttered.

"Are you sure?" Yew asked.

"Yes," she said. She watched them head into the den before spinning around and heading back into the woods. She still hadn't managed to catch a glimpse of a cat today, after all.

Chapter 11

Chase walked along the woods, peering through the leaves to get a glance at the territory that laid on the other side.

Warriors. That's what Yew had called them. She had seen his family members in passing sometimes, but she never stopped to say hi, especially not when her father was constantly inviting them over to their den for company.

Chase found solace in the woods these days. She knew her ventures outside of the meadow were not unknown to her parents, but they didn't seem to care much these days, not when they had three other offspring who continued to make them proud. So what if she was the one weak link in the family? Hadn't she always been?

Chase let out a sigh and laid down, peering through a hole in the bushes for any sign of movement. She supposed the cats didn't have to wander too close to their territory when prey was plentiful this time of year.

Chase kept her eyes gazing forward, waiting for any sign of movement when--

"What are you doing?" came a voice behind her.

Chase jumped, springing out of the bushes. Twigs and leaves clung to her auburn pelt as she caught her breath and stared up at the male fox in front of her.

"Y-Yew!" she stammered.

"Is this where you run off to each day? You just go sit in the bushes?" he asked curiously, smirking a little at her messy pelt.

"I don't go sit in bushes!" she argued.

"That's what it looks like."

Chase let out a tiny growl. "I-I like to look at the cats that pass by."

Yew tilted his head. "Really? How come?"

"I just like to. I think they're interesting. My family doesn't. My father would be angry if he knew I was out here catching a glimpse of them," Chase admitted, tucking her tail between her legs.

"Oh, that's right. I remember you saying you had an interest in cats. I suppose I haven't talked to you much lately. You're always gone when I pass by the meadow," Yew explained.

"My family's insufferable."

"Will you leave the den when you're older?" Yew wondered. "Go to a different part of the forest?"

"I don't know," Chase said, her eyes lingering to the territory behind her. Even if her family was a nuisance, could she leave the forest that housed the most interesting creatures in the world to her?

"What types of cats have you seen?" Yew wondered.

"You don't mind me talking about them?" Chase asked quietly.

He shook his head.

"All kinds. With all different color furs. Some with stripes, some with spots, some dark, some white. I've seen kittens and the warriors and those in between," Chase explained.

"No wonder you asked me about that cat you saw me talking to. You really are interested in them," Yew realized.

"I don't want to be a cat, if that's what you're assuming. There's such a fearful stigma about them that I can't help but be curious. Why are we enemies? Why can't we live in peace?" Chase thought out loud.

"I think you'd like my grandfather," Yew said. "I'll take you to him."

Chase paused. "Are you sure? I don't want to be a bother. I know

I'm bothered every time one of your family members passes through."

Yew chuckled. "You like to say your mind, don't you?"

"Yes. My father doesn't like that," Chase answered.

"I do. Come on, I'll show him to you," Yew said, beginning to walk away from the dense forest.

Chase paused for a moment. She barely knew the fox, but she knew that he was able to speak in cat tongue, and that was enough to grasp her curiosity. She moved her paw forward and began to leave the thick brush of the woods behind.

She crossed the river, finding it easier to do so with the lack of rain. She'd never been on this side of the forest before. She'd barely gone past the meadow.

"This way," Yew said, leading her into the other side of the forest.

She stepped back under the tall trees again and followed him deeper into the woods. Her nose began to pick up the whiff of fox, but was a slightly different scent from her own den. Yew took a few steps further until the bushes parted to reveal a tiny clearing. There was a den peeking out from beneath some grass and bushes. This felt much more secluded than the open meadow Chase was used to.

"Come on," Yew said, descending into the den. Chase awkwardly followed behind. There were only a few foxes inside. She supposed the others were out hunting. She recognized two of the foxes as Yew's parents. They'd been to the meadow before.

"Who's this, Yew?" his mother asked.

"Chase. She's one of Copper's kits."

"I thought Copper only had three," his father thought.

He had five, Chase thought to herself.

"I'm Copper's other daughter. I don't always hang out in the

meadow," Chase answered.

She watched Yew's mother frown. "It's not safe for a young fox to be wandering alone in the woods."

"I manage," she answered simply.

"I wanted to show her the den. And introduce her to you, Claw," Yew said, turning to a frail old fox laying in the corner of the den. At the mention of his name, he opened an eye and stared at Chase with curiosity.

"It's nice to meet you," Chase said, approaching the old fox.

He gave her a look of uncertainty before looking up at Yew.

"Why did you bring this young fox here?" he asked.

"Yew told me you could speak to cats, that you taught him. I find that interesting," Chase said, her heart pounding with anxiety. She wanted to make a good impression on the old fox, hoping that maybe he could...

"Cats, huh?" Claw asked, breaking off Chase's thoughts.

She slowly nodded her head.

"I heard there were warriors living around here. There were a bunch in the forest I grew up in," Claw said, smiling slightly. "But I hear there are territories here."

Chase nodded. "We stay out of their territory, they stay out of ours, but there's still fighting and death anyway..."

Claw slowly sat up. "You want to change that."

Chase froze, beginning to stumble. "I-I didn't...I saw Yew talking to a cat and..." She paused for a moment, trying to compose herself. "It's true that foxes and cats don't get along here. When I saw Yew casually talking with that cat, I saw peace in the future. I saw hope. Maybe that's stupid, but..."

"I'll teach you cat tongue," Claw offered.

"Claw, she didn't ask--"

Yew was cut off by his grandfather again. Claw kept his gaze on Chase, staring at her with intensity.

"But it's what *you* want, right, Chase?"

Chase slowly nodded. "I want to talk to them."

"I'll teach you. Come here every day, just when the sun hits the highest point in the sky."

"I don't know the way--"

"I'll accompany you," Yew offered. "I need to practice a bit. It'll be good to relearn."

"Please, teach me then," Chase requested.

Claw nodded. "You remind me of when I was a kit. I ask that you use this ability wisely. You should not abuse the ability to speak to another animal. We all coexist in this forest."

Chase's eyes widened. "I never intended to! I'm looking forward to learning from you."

Claw grinned. "Good. I'll see you tomorrow then."

Chapter 12

Chase woke up bright and early, excited for the day ahead. Today would be her first day training with Claw, and she was excited to finally get the chance to communicate with the cats she had admired for so long.

Her parents were just stirring as she slipped out of the den. A growl came from behind her.

"Chase, where are you going?" Copper grumbled.

"To see Yew and the other group of foxes," Chase said, spinning around to face her father. She found it odd he cared about her whereabouts when he had shown little signs of paying attention to it in the past.

"Gr...fine. Stay out of trouble then," Copper said, turning back around into the den to go sleep.

Chase grinned and headed out of the meadow into the woods. The sun was just beginning to rise, casting a golden glow over the entire forest. She followed the scent trail Yew had left her over the river and into his family's territory.

She was tempted to stop by the rocks for a bit and see if any cats were nearby, but Chase figured it wouldn't be polite to be late on her first day. She would have plenty of opportunities later to catch a glimpse of the luxurious felines.

Chase headed deeper into the woods until she came into the clearing that Yew had shown her earlier. She easily noticed their burrow and watched as Yew headed out of the den. He stopped, his eyes focusing on Chase.

"You're early," he said.

Chase sunk down. "I'm sorry. I was having trouble sleeping. I was

just too excited."

Yew grinned. "Thankfully, Claw is a bit of an early riser too. Though you should probably come here a little later in the day."

"I guess i thought it would take me longer to get here. If it's too much of a bother, I can leave and come back later," Chase offered.

"Nonsense. Come inside," Yew said. "My parents and siblings are all out hunting, so it's just me and Claw right now. This way."

Chase followed him back into his den, finding Claw slowly stirring in the corner. He was half-asleep and nibbling on a dead rabbit. He squinted his old eyes as Chase entered.

"Is your friend back?" he asked Yew.

"Yes. Chase is here to learn from you," Yew said, scooting her forward with his tail.

Chase stumbled a bit and paused in front of Claw. "Nice to see you again. I'm sorry that I came a bit early, but I hope you'll still teach me."

"Let me finish up my meal, and we can get started right away," Claw said, continuing to take agonizingly slow bites.

Chase sat in the corner, wondering how long it would take Claw to finish a measly rabbit. She cleared her throat, wondering if it would speed Claw's meal along, but he seemed completely oblivious to her impatience.

Finally, he licked around his mouth and nodded. Chase had been half-asleep when he finally spoke up.

"Ah, what a good breakfast. Are you ready to begin, Chase?" he asked.

Chase's eyes shot open, and she nodded vigorously.

"Yes, please! Teach me all you know," she begged.

Yew chuckled beside her. "It'll probably take a while for you to master it. You're not as young as Claw would like you to be to teach you."

"She's young enough that she can probably still pick up the accent well," Claw assured him. "Now, Chase, repeat after me."

For the entirety of the morning into early afternoon, Chase repeated odd sounds from her throat that Claw described as being innately born into cats.

The sounds echoing from Chase's mouth were odd at first, and she felt embarrassed at her attempts to meow and hiss and growl, but Claw was patient with her along the way and told her that it wouldn't be something she could learn overnight.

"When can I start talking to them?" Chase asked excitedly.

"Not for a while. You haven't tried stringing words together. We're just learning the basics. You'll get there eventually. Your accent isn't that bad," Claw grumbled. "By the time the leaves fall, I think you'll have gotten a pretty good hang of it."

Chase grinned in satisfaction and followed Yew out of the den. She was already looking forward to another day of training the next day. She was glad to get further and further from the meadow and her family. While wandering in the woods had been fun, Chase was thankful for more positive social interaction.

"I think Claw really likes you," Yew said as he began walking with her.

"You don't have to walk me back," Chase realized as he followed her away from the den.

"It's not a problem. You're starting to get a hang of things pretty fast. You seem really passionate about learning this. Is there a reason why?" Yew wondered.

"Well, I already told you. I think cats are interesting," Chase said.

"I got that, but is there something else?"

Chase lowered her head and kept walking.

"You talk about your father a lot, how he has problems with you. Does it have something to do with that?"

Chase kept quiet.

"It does," Yew teased.

"I don't need to tell you about it," Chase growled.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to rub a sore spot. What's the matter though? There's got to be a reason you wander off on your own and your parents don't care. Don't you want to talk to someone?"

"My father doesn't like cats," was all Chase answered.

"Well, if that's all..."

"He doesn't like how I talk about them either," Chase mumbled.

They walked in silence for a few moments, listening to their feet land on the ground with each step.

"I always thought they were interesting, but my father said they were predators. I always just saw them as protecting themselves. That's why I wanted to talk to them, to make some peace in the forest.

"Then my sister wandered too far into their territory and was killed by a cat. I was sad, but I also understood why it happened. They were defending themselves. They had young too that needed to be protected.

"My father took us into the woods one day..."

"Chase, you don't need to tell me all this if you really don't want to," Yew interrupted.

"I want to," she decided, already halfway there.

"So your father took you into the woods?"

"He had found a young kitten from the clans wandering around in the woods. He ordered us to kill it, to avenge our dead sister, to give them a taste of their own medicine. I refused and had to watch with disgust as my father and siblings murdered it in front of my eyes. It's one thing to kill to hunt, but another for the pleasure of it. I still feel guilty. I should've done something to save that kit, but..."

"I'm sorry," Yew muttered. "That's...that's *disgusting*."

"I thought so too. My father dislikes my stance on cats. He dislikes me in general. And I don't think my mother is too fond of my behavior either, but she keeps to herself about it. Don't tell them I told you any of this."

"You have my word," Yew agreed.

"So I want to talk to cats, to set things right, to apologize to that grieving mother. We don't have to be sworn enemies. There's always the chance for peace."

"That's a big goal you have there. Maybe when you learn to finally speak to the cats, I could help."

"Would you?" Chase asked, staring up at him.

Yew nodded. "Of course." He glanced up, staring ahead. "Looks like the meadow is right up here. Are you good if I leave you here?"

"Yes, thanks. I'm starting to know my way pretty well around the forest well, so you don't have to walk me back next time," she stated. "I know everyone says I'm a young fox, but I can take care of myself."

Yew smirked. "All right. See you tomorrow, Chase," he said, waving his tail as she moved back into the long, golden grass of the meadow.

Chapter 13

The hot days were merging into the cooler days of autumn. Chase had begun to notice the leaves were turning a crisp shade of yellow as she walked along the familiar path toward Yew's den.

She'd been working diligently each day to master cat tongue. She was now able to form sentences and employ basic grammar. Claw had been satisfied with her progress so far and believed she would be fluent by the time the leaves were a deep red.

Chase was thankful for the frequent lessons. She rarely saw her family these days. They shared the same den and often ate the same prey, but she did her best to stray away from their incessant nagging.

They rarely asked where Chase was going, and even when they did, Chase simply just said she was going to hunt, and they let her be. She knew her parents had given up on her anyway. They were much more concerned with raising Whorl, Hop, and Pounce to live as proper foxes.

A cool breeze rippled across Chase's auburn fur as she crossed the stepping stones of the river to Yew's residence. He was not always at her lessons, but he was in the den often, witnessing Chase practice. He'd often walk her home after, though she kept assuring him that he didn't need to. She'd learned the route home easily after only a few sunrises of lessons.

When Chase arrived to the den today, she could hear hoarse coughing inside. Tilting her head, she slowly entered, finding Yew tending to a sickly-looking Claw.

"Is everything okay?" Chase asked.

Yew glanced up, his eyes tired from what she could only guess was a sleepless night.

"I've--*cough*--just picked up a bit of a cold, that's--*cough*--all," Claw called from the corner of the den.

Chase turned to Yew for more explanation.

"He started coming down with this cough after you left yesterday. He was up all night coughing. My parents have gone to find some herbs," Yew stated.

"Would you like me to head home?" Chase asked Claw.

He shook his head. "I can still teach, can't I? Come and sit."

It was a painfully long lesson interspersed with coughing fits and Yew's worried remarks to call it a day, but Chase continued practicing and learning. Now that she had memorized all cat vocabulary, her goal now was to work on speaking coherently and in formed sentences.

The sun was beginning to descend as Yew exited the den with her.

"You can stay with Claw," she told him.

Yew shook his head. "My parents will be back soon. It's getting darker sooner these days. I want to make sure you get back okay."

"What about you?" Chase asked.

"I'm a big strong fox who already knows how to live around the woods. Don't worry about me," Yew assured her.

Chase slowly nodded and silently walked alongside Yew. She was beginning to rival him in size, though she doubted she'd ever be as tall or muscular as him. Her siblings were catching up to Chase's own parents as well. Though she had not yet lived through four seasons, she was not looking like a small pup anymore.

"Claw is on his last legs," Yew muttered beside her.

Chase's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"He's an old fox," Yew explained. "He's fathered many. My mother is

his most recent child, and she's already had a few litters of her own."

"Do you think he'll..." Chase let her voice drift off.

"I don't know. He might," Yew admitted. "But even if he does, you already have the basics of cat tongue down. I can help you practice and learn the rest. You forget I'm fluent as well."

"I suppose so," Chase murmured, though she'd grown saddened to know that Claw might be in his last days of life. She'd always noticed the white around his muzzle and his graying eyes, but he'd always had a vibrant energy whenever he taught her. She wasn't ready to give that all up yet.

"I hope he feels better," Chase told Yew.

"Don't come to lessons tomorrow. I have a feeling he will only get worse tonight, and I don't want you catching it," Yew told her.

Chase frowned. "But you're susceptible to catching it too!"

"Just don't come tomorrow. You can start up the next day if he's better," Yew promised.

Chase let out a long sigh. "Fine."

...

For an entire day, Chase remained home with her family, straying off to the side as they played and hunted. She tossed a pebble back and forth with her paw, watching the long meadow grass sway in the wind. She had not spent so much time in the meadow than when she was just a young kit.

Her father teased her for not going off and running away into the woods while her siblings seemed adjusted to life without her there. It felt strange being in their presence again. If anything, the day taught her how much she struggled interacting with her family these days.

When the sun finally did rise the next morning, Chase was relieved.

She set out bright and early, hoping to get an update from Yew on whether or not lessons would occur. She knew he would want her to wait for him to arrive, but she could not spend yet another whole day in the presence of her family.

The sun was rising over the forest, casting orange shards onto the pine trees as Chase leaped across the rippling stream. As she grew closer to Yew's den, she noted several smells, most likely belonging to Yew's parents and siblings.

The sound of her feet crackling against twigs and leaves was interrupted by the quiet sobs. Chase froze in her tracks, wondering if it was best to stay back. From those sounds, she could only guess what Claw's condition might now be.

A head peeped out of the den. Chase let her shoulders relax as she noted Yew. He looked upset and angered as he quickly padded over to her.

"You shouldn't be here," he growled.

"What happened? I wanted to see how Claw was doing," Chase honestly admitted.

"Claw is dead. He died this morning."

Chase felt her heart break. She dug her claws into the soil and hung her head, letting a few spare tears drip onto the ground below. She had lost a kind soul in her life and potentially the best teacher she would ever have.

"Chase?" Yew asked.

"Why-why didn't you come get me?!" Chase exclaimed, feeling miserable. "I didn't even get to say good-bye to him or thank him."

Whatever frustration Yew had shown earlier had vanished. HIs eyes grew concerned as he stared down at Chase.

"I-I didn't think it would get this bad. I didn't want you coming because I didn't want you getting sick. It's true it was just a little cold, but his old body couldn't handle it," Yew said quietly. "I'm

sorry, Chase."

"I wanted to tell him he was the best teacher ever," Chase whispered, still withholding tears.

"He knew that, Chase. He knew how much you enjoyed his lessons. He was always so excited for you to arrive," Yew assured her, gently setting one of his dark paws over hers.

"I'm glad," Chase said, sniffing a bit. "Tell your family I send my regards then. I'm sure you're all going through a lot more than me."

She spun around, ready to leave the scene of misery when Yew spoke up.

"Be here tomorrow," he said.

"What for?" Chase asked, the realization that her mentor was dead slowly setting in.

"I promised I would teach you, didn't I? You need to keep practicing, so you can talk to the cats one day," Yew reminded her.

Chase slightly grinned. That was right. She had come here after all to communicate with the cats, to someday bring peace to the forest. Claw had wanted the same thing too. She hoped she could achieve that goal for him.

"See you tomorrow," she said, waving her tail as she disappeared into the thick brush of the forest.

Chapter 14

A stray red leaf gently floated down from the sky onto Chase's dark paw. She stared at it in curiosity, glancing up at the gray sky up above. It looked like it might rain later. There had not been an ounce of sunshine all day.

"I heard that old fox across the stream died," Chase heard her father tell her mother.

"Oh, yes. I was hunting the other day and heard," Apple stated.

"I'm not sure what they expected living in such cold and dense woods near those darn cats. It's no wonder the poor soul got sick," Copper grumbled.

Chase crunched the leaf beneath her paw, trying to release the tension gathering in her shoulders. She was still saddened over Claw's death. Yew had been doing his best at teaching her, though he was a bit rusty, and it was as if they were tutoring each other. Chase missed the friendly disposition of the elderly fox.

"Their den isn't near the cats," Chase stated, her back turned from her parents.

"Ah, well you would know due to your constant visits. You're going to get yourself killed one day," Copper grumbled.

Chase spun around, anger flashing in her eyes. "I never wander in their territory. I respect their land. If you think that's where I've been going each day, then you're mistaken."

"How about you go play with your siblings?" Apple suggested, trying to break the tension between Chase and her father. "I know Whorl has missed playing with you."

A part of Chase felt guilty for never indulging in innocent games

with her siblings anymore, but she still could not look at them the same, not after they killed that kitten so violently. Even Whorl, the sister Chase had felt closest with, seemed distant these days.

"I don't want to," Chase stated, standing up and beginning to walk through the grass.

"You act as if you've seen the world," Copper barked. "You've only lived through two seasons, yet you act so wise, too mature for your age. You worry your mother sick sometimes, you know? Taking off like that, never acting like how a fox should."

"Leave me alone," Chase murmured before she became tempted to tell her mother how much her father was a monster. The murder of the kitten had been kept secret, as she'd promised, but she longed more and more each day to tell her mother of the atrocious act her father and siblings had committed. But what would change?

Nothing would, Chase told herself.

She stood up, feeling the wind brush against her pelt as she slowly left the den behind. Chase was due to visit Yew anyway for some more training. She was proficient now, practically fluent. She hoped one day to use those skills to speak to the cats nearby.

Chase went through the forest and across the stream until she came to Yew's den. He was sitting outside, glancing up at the pine needles swaying in the wind.

"Oh, there you are!" he said, his eyes lighting up at the sight of her. "I was worried you wouldn't come today."

"Sorry. Got in a little fight at home," was all Chase said.

"Is everything okay?" Yew asked.

"Yes. Can we start practicing?" she wondered.

"Sure. My parents are resting in the den, so we can practice out here," he suggested.

"Okay."

They went through basic speech exercises before practicing translating fox into cat. It was not hard at all for Chase, who often practiced in her mind while she watched her siblings play in the meadow.

"Claw would be proud. You've really improved," Yew told her.

"Do you think so?" Chase asked. "I'm glad to hear that. He was a great teacher."

"He always loved teaching. I'm glad he got to do it until he died," Yew told her. "And he had such a good last pupil too."

"Thanks," Chase said, smiling slightly. "Are you getting in the hang of it again?"

"A bit. I have an accent of sorts, but I'm going to keep up practicing for Claw's sake."

"What about your parents and siblings?" Chase wondered. "Are they proficient?"

"They were at one point. I don't think they are anymore. We haven't been in the presence of cats in a long time. But now we are again," Yew said.

Chase tilted her head. "Do you think we'll ever speak to them? I want to visit one day."

"Slow down. You can't just barge into their territory unannounced," Yew warned.

"I know," Chase said, twisting her paws into the soil. "I'm anxious to meet some cats. They've always fascinated me, you know. I want to..."

"You want to what?" Yew wondered.

"I wanted to apologize for what my father did to that kitten," Chase said quietly, avoiding eye contact.

"Chase, I doubt you'd be able to locate the mother of that kitten or

the clan she belongs to. If you bring up that circumstance, it might just make things escalate. That was your father's sin, not yours."

"I still feel responsible," Chase said quietly.

A silence settled between them. Chase wasn't sure how to fill it, so she began practicing cat in her head again until a tiny droplet of water landed on her black nose.

"Oh, it's raining," she murmured, staring up at the sky. Tiny droplets of water were falling from the sky, dampening the earth.

"It's nice to have the rain back after a long summer," Yew said.

Chase nodded, ignoring her dampened pelt. It felt nice to lift her head and stare up at the sky as rain gently dripped onto her. She knew if she were back home, her parents would have issued everyone inside, worrying they'd get sick. But Yew was quiet and let her stand in the rain, as if there was nothing wrong with doing so.

"Chase? Do you want to come inside?" Yew asked.

She was wrong. He also wanted her to come inside as well.

"I should probably head back," Chase suggested.

"I wouldn't until the storm lets up," Yew warned. "The stream might be too flooded to cross. You can stay here for a bit. I doubt you want to go back to your family so soon. Plus, this gives us more reason to study."

"True," Chase said, following him into the den. His parents were resting in a corner. Chase's eyes turned to the corner that Claw used to curl up in. The den seemed foreign without his nest bundled in the corner.

"All right, back to work!" Yew stated.

"Oh, you were serious?" Chase asked, beginning to giggle.

"I promised Claw I'd finished your lessons, and that's what I'll do. Now, translate this sentence into fox."

Chase laughed and began to speak, their quiet chatter filling the den as the sound of falling rain echoed throughout the forest.

Chapter 15

Chase turned her body toward the woods, ready to take off to her normal lessons with Yew. Though she didn't really need to practice every day now that she had pretty much mastered the language, Chase had grown so accustomed to being away from her family each day that it was now unbearable to remain in their presence for too long.

She moved a dark paw forward, about to head off, when a shout came from the den behind her.

"Where are you off to, Chase?" Apple asked, peeking her head out of the den.

"I-I was..." Chase set her paw back down.

Apple tilted her head. "Let's all hang out as a family today while your father hunts. We can go for a walk in the woods! I know how much you love being surrounded by trees."

Chase's heart warmed slightly at her mother's attempts to make an effort, but she would rather spend her day with Yew. Even practicing sounded better than a day out in the woods with her mother and siblings.

"But I--"

"Just for today," her mother begged.

"Fine," Chase agreed, heading back into the den. Her brothers were rolling around and batting at each other while her sister sat in the corner, brushing off dirt from her auburn pelt.

"Hop, Pounce, quit wrestling, and Whorl, stop messing with your coat. We're all going for a walk in the woods," Apple stated.

"But there are scary creatures in there," Whorl argued.

"You've been in the woods before. Plus, I'll protect you from all the big, bad monsters," Apple teased, batting her daughter playfully with her paw. Whorl erupted in laughter, falling flat on her back.

"Chase is coming too?" Pounce wondered.

Chase slowly nodded her head.

"Let's be off, then," Apple said, stepping out of the den's entrance. Chase trailed behind her brothers and sister as they left the familiarity of the meadow behind to enter the dense forest.

Whorl fell back some to speak to Chase.

"I'm glad you tagged alone," she said, a grin on her face. "I barely see you these days."

"Oh...yeah," Chase responded, watching as her sister caught back up to the crowd. Her stomach began to twist in guilt, but she reminded herself that she should not be obligated to owe her family anything. Her siblings still presented themselves as young fox kits exploring the forest for the first time, but she'd seen their dark side. Chase shivered at the thought of that day.

Apple pointed out the changing autumn colors to her children, though Chase was already familiar with the red and orange leaves. She passed by them every day on her way to Yew's residence. She remembered when the first bit of yellow had begun to replace the bright green.

Her siblings were ecstatic to be out in the woods. Truthfully, it was a beautiful day. The air was cool, but not uncomfortable, the sun was shining, and the stream was gurgling in the distance after a nice rainfall. But Chase wished she was experiencing the walk alone.

She kept quiet while her siblings pointed out squirrels and birds. Apple told them all about the snow that was to come when the weather got much colder. Meanwhile, Chase hoped that Yew wasn't worrying about her. She knew he didn't expect her every day, but she visited each day anyway.

Chase glanced around, familiar with this part of the forest. She regularly walked through this part on her way to Yew's den. She had fallen quite behind her family now, and seeing that they didn't seem to notice her company anyway, she turned the other way, watching them disappear into the brush.

Chase let out a sigh of relief, grateful for a few moments of silence. She knew she could not escape to Yew's. Her mother would no doubt be looking for her in a matter of minutes. But for now, she could wander around the area a bit.

Chase walked along the forest floor, sniffing the air. It smelled faintly of cat. She realized she was walking close to the border separating a clan's territory from their own.

Chase kept her eyes peeled, hopeful she might see a cat. It had been so long since she had kept watch for one, what with her frequent lessons in cat language. But now, she could possibly even speak to a cat! Her heart leapt with excitement at the thought.

As the minutes ticked on, Chase wondered if her mother would ever come back to look for her. Chase knew the way back to the meadow, but she wasn't sure if Apple knew that.

Chase let out a sigh, feeling guilty for leaving her family for too long. She supposed she could follow their scent and catch up. She lifted her nose into the air and sniffed, beginning to walk back in the direction of her family.

A low growl and startling squeak caught her ear. It was in the distance, buried in the cat territory no doubt. She could not identify the growl. It belonged to neither cat nor fox, but the squeal was most certainly a kitten.

Without thinking of the consequences, Chase rushed into the cat territory, their scent quickly filling her nose as she left the other part of the forest behind. She rushed toward the nose until an overwhelming scent of badger filled her nose.

Creeping into the bushes nearby, Chase spotted two badgers cornering two small kittens. One was silver-blue, the other a brown

tabby. The tabby's tail was bleeding, most likely from a bite. The two kittens were shivering, possibly awaiting death as the badgers neared. As the silver-blue one shut her eyes, Chase leapt out of the bushes, striking one of the badger's nose with her claws.

"Get out of here!" she snarled at the badgers, watching blood drip from the nose of the one she struck. She expected them to fight back, but seeing her defense of the kittens, they only growled and moved on, not wanting to fight a larger animal now.

Chase's heart beat rapidly as she watched the two badgers take off. She spun around, staring down at the tiny kittens. Their eyes were widened in fear, no doubt believing that she would be the one to kill them now.

"*Who exactly are you*?" the silver-blue kitten asked, her eyes glazed with curiosity.

"*I am*--" Chase's ears pricked as another voice sounded in the distance.

"Chase! Where are you?!" came her mother's familiar call.

Chase frowned. She had hoped the kits could show her back to the clan. Perhaps she would have been able to speak to the cats there. She at least wanted to make sure that brown one got medical attention, but it seemed all she could do was keep them out of trouble for now.

"*My mom's coming! I have to go!"* she quickly told them before leaping back into the bushes and rushing out of the cat's territory. Hopefully some more cats would be along to collect the kittens and bring them back home.

Chase sprinted back into her part of the woods, tumbling down in front of her mother.

"Chase! Where have you been?!" Apple exclaimed, looking furious.

"S-Sorry! I fell too far behind and got lost," she lied, standing back up and brushing the dirt off her pelt.

"It's not safe to wander alone around here. It's close to the cats," her mother said. "We're on our way back to the meadow now."

"Sorry," she said, falling behind her mother as they made the trek home. She couldn't help but contain a smile as she thought of the day's events. She'd managed to communicate with the cats! Chase would have liked to know the kits' names or learn of their clan, but for now, she was thrilled just to have the chance to speak to them.

Chapter 16

Chase could barely sleep that night. All she thought about again and again was her encounter with those two kittens, how she had valiantly saved them from the badgers and even managed to communicate with them. Yew would be excited when she told him how her endless days of practicing had paid off. She was planning to tell him as soon as the sun rose.

Chase's family was exhausted after the previous day. Even as the sun's morning rays began to reflect on the tri-colored leaves, they slept soundly. Chase, meanwhile, was wide awake. She crept over the sleeping foxes out of the den, feeling it was best to greet Yew early and apologize for neglecting training the day before.

The morning air was growing colder and colder. Chase wondered when she would get to see the tiny snowflakes of winter. Her mother had spoken so fondly about it while her father always complained about the bitter cold of that season. Either way, she was thankful for her thick auburn coat that kept her warm as she wandered through the woods in the morning.

A light fog hung over the meadow as Chase crept away. She moved deeper into the forest and took in a deep breath of air. She felt like today was going to be a good day.

As she headed toward the stream that separated her home from Yew's, her gaze wandered toward the cats' territory. Chase knew it was unwise to linger there, but a part of her wished for, *hoped,* she would run into the same kittens from yesterday. If only Apple's call hadn't cut their conversation so short...

I'll just go for a quick peek, Chase told herself. Finding the coast clear, she slipped into their territory and wandered through it quietly. *If I see one cat, I will immediately flee,* she decided as she continued to wander through their territory.

Chase realized this was another part of the forest she had never

seen before. She wondered how the cats took advantage of this territory, what food they ate, what dens they lived in, and how they kept their territory safe. She had to imagine there were dozens of them wandering around here, judging by the multiple scents that invaded her nose.

The sound of leaves crunching caught Chase's attention. She turned her head, noticing something gray moving in the distance up ahead. Could it be?

Chase crouched her body down and approached slowly, trying to be nimble on her feet as she moved over the forest floor. She grew closer, noticing a tiny kitten, the same one as yesterday, she presumed, walking calmly through the woods.

The kitten would stop every few seconds to crunch on a leaf or breathe in the sweet scent of the forest. Chase had to imagine the kitten did not come to the woods very often. She appeared quite young, though perhaps that was due to Chase towering over her now that Chase was almost fully grown in size.

Chase realized she could not stalk the kit forever. If she kept this act up too long, the kitten might be scared and run back to her clan to warn of a malicious fox on their territory.

Chase sucked in a deep breath and shouted, *"Hi again!"*

The kitten jumped and spun around. Her green eyes widened at the sight of Chase, but slowly, the kit's shoulders relaxed with what Chase could only assume was recognition. After all, they had just seen each other the other day.

"You--you were the one who saved me and Owlkit," the kit said, slowly approaching Chase. Chase glanced down at her pointed ears and emerald green eyes. The kitten's pelt was a sleek silver-blue that looked absolutely beautiful against the colored forest. Chase could not help but admire how unique every cat looked. She sometimes wished foxes could look as beautiful.

"My name is Chase," she introduced herself. *"Unlike my family, I don't want to kill cats. My dad says cats get in the way of our prey and must*

be killed, but I really don't know what's so bad about them."

"I'm Moonkit--"

"Moonkit? What a strange name!" Chase exclaimed. She had never imagined the cats to go by such odd name combinations. Then again, she was thrilled to finally have a name for the she-cat.

Moonkit, Chase thought over and over, trying not to forget the name of her new companion.

"I live in FoxClan," Moonkit explained, *"We all have names like that. My brother's name is Owlkit, and my mother's name is Silverwhisker."*

Chase tilted her head, pausing for a moment to consider if it was the correct question to ask.

"What about your father?"

Moonkit tilted her head down, staring at her paws. *"He left us."*

"I'm sorry," Chase responded quietly. She was about to tell Moonkit that fathers were, at times, overrated, when the she-cat spoke up again, sounding confused.

"If you're a fox, how can you speak fluent cat?"

Chase chuckled. *"I'm surprised you didn't ask earlier! I met an old fox who trained me in the cat language. He died, but I've been practicing. I've been trying to get cats and foxes to make amends so they no longer battle."*

The she-cat's eyes lit up. *"Wow. So you're like a leader. I want to be leader of my clan, but it's not like I'll ever get to try..."*

Chase smiled warmly at the she-cat. What she had said was kind, but Chase never could see herself as a leader, not when all she did created such controversy in her family. But the little kit had potential, considering the fact she was wandering alone out here in the woods.

"Moonkit, you can always be leader," Chase said warmly.

The kit grinned, opening her mouth to speak, when a yowl cut her off.

"*MOONKIT, DON'T MOVE!"* came an unfamiliar voice.

Chase turned her head, noticing an anxious looking silver she-cat. One look at the cat's unsheathed claws, and Chase took off into the bushes, running back to her side of the territory. Thankfully, she was not pursued, only hearing arguments sounding back and forth between Moonkit, and who Chase could only assume was her mother, Silverwhisker.

Despite the fact Chase could have very well been attacked, she felt elated to have been able to have an actual conversation with a clan cat. Chase went through the conversation again and again in her mind.

Her name was Moonkit, she was a member of FoxClan, she had a brother named Owlkit and a mother named Silverwhisker, and she wanted to be leader of her clan one day.

Chase giggled to herself and took off towards the stream, unable to contain her excitement as she rushed to tell Yew all about what she had encountered.

Chapter 17

Chase bounded through the forest gleefully. Her paws carried her across the ground quickly and over the stepping stones across the river. She nearly slipped due to her excitement but recovered herself quickly.

Now close to Yew's den, Chase picked up her speed, excited to tell him the news. She let out a screech, however, as she collided into the fox on the other side of a thick tree trunk.

"Ouch!" she shouted, hitting her head against the fox's chest.

"Chase? What are you doing?" Yew asked, staring down at her concernedly. "I was just coming to look for you."

"Me too!"

"Is everything all right?" Yew asked. "You didn't come practice yesterday, not that I think you should come every day, but...it seemed odd."

"Sorry. My mother made us all go on a walk through the forest. I was going to tell you later in the day but I got...distracted," Chase stated.

"Distracted?"

"I met some cats and talked to them, Yew!" she said excitedly, bouncing up and down. "All that training with Claw and you worked. I can talk fluently, hold conversations. This is one step closer to my goal of uniting both species."

"Slow down," Yew warned, taking a seat. "What happened?"

"I saved two kittens from a badger the other day," Chase said. "They were about to be slaughtered, and I saved them!"

"And you spoke to them?" Yew asked.

"A little bit. I ran into them again today, and had a longer conversation with one of the kits."

"You snuck into the cats' territory?" Yew asked, his face no longer lighting up with the same curiosity.

"Just for a little bit. I know the borders well," Chase explained. "And I know when's a good time to get out. The kit's mother found us, so I took off."

Yew's eyes widened. "The kit's mother?!"

"Yes, but as soon as I saw her I took off. What's wrong?" Chase asked, tilting her head as she noticed Yew's mood grow more and more sour.

"I'm happy you were able to communicate with them. Claw would be proud, but...I don't think you should be running recklessly into the cats' territory like that. Isn't that how your sister died?" Yew asked.

Anger flared through Chase.

"My sister was younger and foolish and shouldn't have been going out into the woods without knowledge of the clans in the first place. I'm not like her. I'm almost fully grown. I respect and understand the cats," Chase argued.

"You haven't even lived through a winter yet," Yew pointed out.

"So you're saying I shouldn't be talking to them?"

"No, but...you should be careful. A mother cat is especially a cat you don't want to cross. That little kit might not say a word about your friendship, but you can bet the mother cat will tell the clan. Then they'll send more patrols around, and if they catch you in the territory again, they'll definitely harm you, perhaps even kill you," Yew warned.

"Th-that won't happen!" Chase argued, slashing her tail.

"You're telling me that if a cat came in here and started killing foxes or harming their young, the foxes wouldn't fight back?"

"I'm not harming any of the kits! I saved them!"

"But not every adult cat believes a kitten all the time, Chase," Yew warned.

"You're sounding more and more like my father," Chase growled. "I thought you were on my side! I thought you, more than anyone, would understand me." Betrayal coursed through her veins. She thought Yew had been a friend, an ally, but he seemed to have the same ideologies as her own father.

She turned her body, about to head back to the meadow, when Yew's tail came to rest on her shoulder.

"Hey, hold up! I didn't mean it that way," Yew stated.

"It sure sounds like you did," Chase grumbled, digging her claws into the dirt. She was still refusing to look at Yew, despite how his tail on her shoulder made her shiver.

Slowly, Yew removed his tail. "I just want to keep you safe. Claw would have wanted that, too. I won't pretend you get along well with your family. Otherwise, you wouldn't be coming here every day. They know nothing about this, do they?"

"No," Chase said quietly.

"That's what I thought. But they let you go off anyway."

"Yes," Chase replied, slowly turning to face him. "That's how it's always been, really. They cared at one point, but slowly, they just stopped. I don't need them though, really. They clearly don't need me."

"I'm sorry your family is in shambles. But either way, someone still needs to care for you, right? Your family may not care where you go off and what you do in the woods, but I do. I'm willing to bet your family would be upset if you got hurt, though they might not show it. I'm not trying to act like a parent, Chase, but I just want to

make sure you're safe," Yew explained.

Chase suddenly felt guilty for lashing out early. She twisted her paws around in the dirt, still unable to make eye contact with him even though she'd been touched by his words.

"I've never had someone actually care about my well-being before," she muttered.

"Your family does."

"But I've never believed someone actually cares for my safety until now," Chase stated, slowly looking up at him. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I didn't mean to come off the same way as your father. I apologize for that," Yew stated.

"Yew, I still want to see the cats though. I felt like I was being listened to when I spoke to them. The kit I met, Moonkit, seems troubled too. I think I could help her," Chase said.

"I don't know how much of that you could do, but I know speaking to cats is exciting to you. I probably won't do much in swaying you from that, will I?" Yew asked, chuckling a bit.

"No, sorry," Chase said, laughing slightly too. "But I'll be careful! I won't go every day, just once in a while. If I find Moonkit again, we can figure out when to meet."

"Why is a kit wandering around in the woods like that anyway?" Yew wondered.

"I have a feeling she doesn't have very good parents either," Chase teased. "It was exciting finally speaking to a cat though. I feel like...do you think I made up for that kit's death by saving Moonkit and Owlkit?"

"Yes, but I don't think you had to make up for that kit's death in the first place when you had nothing to do with it," Yew told her.

"I could've saved that kit," Chase muttered quietly.

"Those days are over. You can speak to cats now, save them from badgers apparently, and one day, I'm sure you'll unite all of them together. But for now, how about we practice some more since you'll be speaking to cats pretty frequently from here on out?"

"Sure!" Chase said, following him back to his familiar den.

Chapter 18

Thank you again for all the support on this story. I never expected to get such a positive response :) Spring semester has started up, which means I'll be back to updating bi-monthly unfortunately, instead of weekly. Sorry for a long break in between! I had a very busy two weeks.

Chase rushed through the autumn woods, bouncing in excitement as she came upon the FoxClan border. She had visited Moonkit a few times since, exchanging conversation with her during those lazy afternoons when the sun hung high in the sky. She felt as if she were forming a friendship, creating a deep bond. She hoped all cats were as friendly and willing to speak to her. If a compromise was going to be made, she needed to establish friendly relations with the clan cats.

Chase's day was filled to the brim now. She hunted for her own meal in the morning, met with Moonkit in the early afternoon, and shared her experience with Yew after. Practice had mostly died down now that it was clear Chase was fluent in cat tongue, but she enjoyed spending her afternoons and evening with him, just chatting casually. Yew had become one of her closest colleagues, someone she confided deeply in. Her relationship with him felt different from her friendship with Moonkit, but Chase could not figure out why.

Chase crossed into the border carefully. She had not been caught yet, partially because she and Moonkit had agreed to meet at the border's edge to guarantee both of their safety. Chase doubted Copper would show any mercy if Moonkit ended up on the wrong side of the border.

"Moonkit," Chase whispered.

Two silver blue ears pricked out from behind a bush. The tiny she-

cat slowly moved out of the bushes, her green eyes gleaming happily at Chase.

"You came!"</i> Moonkit exclaimed.

"Of course," Chase replied.*"How are you doing?"*

Moonkit began launching into her troubles, speaking about her desire to train soon, her annoying mother, her soft brother, and so forth. Chase did her best to console Moonkit at times like these, but she realized there were deeper familial issues in Moonkit's life. Chase her own share of those, but they did not seem to compare to Silverwhisker's ignorance toward her own daughter in favor of her son, Owlkit, instead.

"She doesn't like that I sneak out into the woods, though I don't know why. It's not as if she cares if I die or not," Moonkit stated.

Chase frowned.*"I don't think that's true. She seemed concerned when she chased me off that one time. I don't think a mother would care that little for their child."* Chase paused a bit at this statement. She truly wondered if her family would care if something happened to her while she wandered in the woods. They had no opposition to it anymore, probably because Chase could care for herself just fine, but a part of her wondered if she would be mourned like Rush was so long ago.

"You don't understand, Chase. I hate her," Moonkit growled. *"And my brother gets on my nerves too. You're one of the few I can talk to."*

Chase gulped at this statement. Did she really mean that? Perhaps it only came with the kit's frustration. Chase did not get along well with her family, especially her father, but she did not hate Copper.

There was something lingering in Moonkit's eyes, something Chase couldn't quite put a paw on. There was a twinge of red in them, or so she thought, but it might have just been the way the sun was reflecting against the auburn leaves.

*"Are you excited for training?"*Chase asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Immediately, Moonkit's eyes lit up. She bounced up and down excitedly, swaying her tail in the breeze.*"Of course I am! I'm trying to figure out who my mentor will be. Some cats have told me I'm too small to be leader, but Owlkit told me once that my small size makes me quick and nimble. One time I caught a mouse at here all on my own, before even training!"*

Chase smiled. *"You must already have some skill in you, then. If you keep working hard, I'm sure FoxClan will recognize your talents."*

Moonkit grinned, showing off her sharp incisors.*"Thanks, Chase! I'm so glad you listen to me! I don't have many friends back at camp."*

Chase frowned at this statement. She wondered why the she-cat was so removed from her peers. It was true her personality was a little bold at first, but she seemed passionate about being a warrior and working on her skills. She was confident, something that Chase felt she lacked at times.

Chase shuffled her paws in the dirt. *"So, do you think one day you could take me to camp? To speak to your leader, Sunstar? I'd like to try eventually. But I know you're busy and have training soon, so..."*

Moonkit tilted her head.*"Yeah, maybe one day. No one knows I come out here to meet you though. Then again, they don't care much for where I go."*

Sounds like me, Chase thought. The sun had moved from its original place when Chase had first met with Moonkit. She figured it was about time to get going.

"I need to head out now. Don't want to stay too long and get my scent everywhere, you know? Just keep trying, and I'm sure you'll be a great warrior!" Chase said enthusiastically.

Moonkit smiled and nodded, waving her tail as Chase slipped back into her part of the woods. Chase grinned as she left, hoping their conversation was at least making a difference in Moonkit's personal life. Eventually she'd be able to talk to the leader of the clan, but for now, she was fine with their casual friendship. After all, Moonkit had a lot of flaws that Chase needed to help her with. Perhaps it

was better to make more intimate connections before reaching out to the entire clan.

The sky was beginning to cloud up overhead. Chase frowned and quickened her pace to Yew's den, the first raindrops beginning to drip as she stepped inside.

Yew looked up in surprise. The rest of his family were resting in various corners of the den, feeling lazy from the rainy day.

"I didn't think you were coming with the rain," he admitted.

Chase shook off her damp coat. "Rain or snow, I'll be here," she said.

Yew chuckled. "You haven't even seen your first snowfall yet."

"Well, if the rain doesn't bother me, hopefully snow won't either," Chase said, walking over toward him.

He took a step back slightly, then cleared his throat. "How was your visit with Moonkit? That's where you came from, right?"

"She's such a sweetheart!" Chase exclaimed. "Going on and on about how she's going to be a good warrior. If only her family and clan cared more about her though. I think she has a lot of potential."

"You're still staying on the edge of the border?"

"Yes!" Chase exclaimed. "You're like a parent sassing me around," she complained as she took a seat.

Yew rolled his eyes and sat next to her, his fur brushing against hers. It felt warm, comforting, like Chase could just curl up in it. She moved away slightly as the thought crossed her mind, wondering where that idea had come from when Yew began to launch into conversation, asking how her day had gone.

Chase spoke and spoke, telling him all she had learned from Moonkit about the clans thus far and how she had even personally asked Moonkit to speak to her leader about letting Chase visit.

"Do you think it'll happen?" Yew asked, sounding worried.

"I hope it does!"

"Moonkit may like you, but not many cats like foxes, Chase," Yew warned.

"Well, it's not like it will happen anytime soon, I don't think. I hope it does. Imagine how big of a step that would be!" Chase exclaimed.

"You're always so optimistic," Yew said, laughing slightly.

"What's wrong with that?!" Chase exclaimed.

"Nothing, nothing," Yew replied. "It just lifts my spirits, that's all." He glanced outside the den at the pouring rain and frowned. The sky had already grown dark, marking that it was time for Chase to leave.

"Well, I should get--"

"Wait," Yew interrupted. "I don't want you going out in the storm alone. Why don't you stay here for the night?"

"Are you sure?! I don't want to intrude!" Chase exclaimed.

"My parents just hunted this morning, so we have plenty of prey. You can go back tomorrow, when the rain has stopped. These autumn storms can get nasty," Yew warned.

Chase lingered by the entrance, staring at the rain pouring down from the sky. She really did think she could make it back, but she supposed her family wouldn't worry too much if she returned the next morning.

"Well...okay. But I should leave first thing tomorrow so my family doesn't worry," Chase said.

"Agreed," Yew replied, curling down on the den floor.

Chase awkwardly laid a few feet from him, shivering at the wind that blew into the den from the storm. Her eyes were growing droopy though, and her limbs stopped shaking when warm fur circled around her.

One eye peeked open. "Yew?" she murmured.

"Go to sleep," he said, resting his head near hers and curling his tail tighter around her.

Chase let out a yawn and did as she was told.

Chapter 19

The smell of fresh rain lingered over the forest in the morning. Chase slowly opened her eyes, finding bright sunshine flooding over the damp earth. She could see Yew's silhouette outside the den and remembered suddenly that she had spent the night. Though she longed to linger, she knew it would be best to head home.

Chase stood up and stretched her limbs before exiting the den. Yew turned his head to look at her and gave her a faint smile. Perhaps she had only imagined him curling up next to her the night before.

"I should head home," Chase said.

"I'll take you back," he offered, though Chase clearly knew the way these days. She didn't argue though, not minding a bit of company as she began the short trip back.

The meadow began to come into view shortly into their journey. Chase hid her frown and continued walking alongside Yew. She expected him to stop with her at the meadow's edge, but he walked through the tall grass with her, up toward her den.

Apple was sitting outside of the den, and at the sight of Chase approaching, Chase watched her mother's shoulders visibly sag.

"Oh, thank goodness. We were worried you had gotten caught in the storm!" Apple exclaimed, rushing forward to her daughter and rasping her tongue over Chase's forehead.

"S-Sorry to worry you," Chase murmured, surprised at the bit of affection. "But Yew and his family allowed me to spend the night."

As Apple began thanking Yew, Chase watched the rest of her family creep out of the den. They did not appear as relieved as Apple, just as Chase had suspected.

"I should be off now," Yew said.

"Yew, you should stay and eat some rabbit my father caught this morning," Whorl interjected.

Chase tilted her head at her sister, unsure of the motive behind such a comment. Her paws prickled with something akin to envy. She was about to assure Yew that he was not obligated to stay, but Yew spoke before she could.

"I should really get back to my family. Maybe another time though," Yew offered.

"Next time for sure!" Whorl called, waving her tail at him.

"Bye," Chase murmured quietly as Yew began to disappear into the tall grass.

"What made you think to go out in a storm?" Copper grumbled as Chase headed back inside the den. "Your mother was going insane, thinking you had died of the cold."

"I was fine!" Chase argued, her hair standing on her back. Suddenly she had no appetite. She spun around, back toward the entrance of the den.

"You better not be taking off again," Copper warned.

"I'm just going to sit outside. Relax," Chase growled as she exited the den once more. She could hear the pleasant chatter of her parents and siblings. Once she had wished for that happy family dynamic to return, but now she was content being away from it.

At the sound of footsteps exiting the den, Chase turned her head to notice Whorl. Once, she and her sister had been close, but Chase had since lost those deep connections with all her family members.

"Yew should come again sometime," Whorl said.

"Why? You barely know him," Chase commented.

"I think he's a handsome fox," Whorl responded.

Chase's claws dug into the earth, the comment bothering her more

than she thought it would. She had heard her parents mumble about how Yew's family could bring forward potential mates for their kits. But what made Whorl think that Yew was going to choose *her* as a mate?

"You don't even--"

"I don't even what," Whorl growled.

"You don't know him," Chase said.

"I could!" Whorl exclaimed. "I could know him! Introduce me to him."

"No," Chase responded.

"You want him all to yourself?"

"What? No! I--"

"Where is it that you head off to each day? Is it to *his* den?" Whorl asked.

"Not all the time!" Chase growled. "Sometimes I just wander around the woods. I don't think you're his type."

"And you are?" Whorl retorted, shattering Chase's heart.

"Look, I'm not going to set you up with Yew. If you want him so much, go introduce yourself. That's not *my* responsibility," Chase responded.

"What a cruel sister you are. First, you get Rush killed, and you won't even help me out--"

"I did *not* kill Rush!" Chase said, standing up and slashing her tail. "And I'm certainly not going to aid a sister who just accused me of doing such a thing." She began walking away, furious with Whorl. It was hard to believe the two had gotten along so swimmingly as young kits.

Chase wasn't sure where she walking. A part of her wanted to see

Yew, but he had just left, and what would she tell him? That Whorl was fighting over Yew with her? Chase admitted she was feeling a twinge of jealousy, but she could not admit that she and Whorl had been arguing over him.

Chase began meandering toward the FoxClan border without even realizing it. She had to refocus on her main goal--creating an alliance between the foxes and cats. Moonkit was always someone friendly to talk to when Chase was feeling down.

She crossed over the border carefully, finding the silver-blue kit sitting under a tall tree that was painted with red and orange leaves. A stray leaf lost its grip on the branch and drifted down toward Moonkit's nose. Chase watched the kit lift her head up to the sky to admire it.

"Hi, Moonkit," Chase said, that little bit of enthusiasm always in her voice a bit absent.

"I was wondering when you would visit! I was waiting all morning!" Moonkit exclaimed.

"I'm sorry. I just got into a bit of a fight with my sister," Chase admitted.

"Owlkit and I have fights sometimes, too," Moonkit responded.

"Well, it was a bit more than that."

"What was it about?"

"Oh, some tod I spend my time with that my sister apparently fancies," Chase responded, taking a seat.

"Do you have a crush, Chase?!" Moonkit exclaimed.

"Oh, not me," Chase replied. *"But my sister does, I suppose. I don't want to talk about the argument though."*

"Sometimes I wish I had a mate," Moonkit said, glancing around.

"But you're still very young," Chase pointed out. *"I'm young too. It's*

really best to wait--"

"When I get a mate, I'll introduce you to him," Moonkit said, flashing Chase a smile.

Chase felt a bit uneasy at Moonkit's excitement over love. It seemed odd for a kit as young as her (even if she was close to apprentice age) to be so enamored with the idea of love already. Desperate to move the conversation away from romance, Chase asked, *"How have things been going, Moonkit?"*

"My mother continues to get on my nerves," Moonkit growled. Chase watched the she-cat flex her claws slightly, noticing the glint that came off the sharp edges.

"I'm sorry," Chase said. *"But soon you will be an apprentice, and you'll get to work harder toward becoming leader."*

"I'm looking forward to it," Moonkit replied.

Their conversation ended slightly after, though Chase had sensed something off about her interaction with Moonkit. She brushed the thought aside. It must have come from the events that had occurred earlier in the day. Moonkit was still just Moonkit. That's who she had always been.

Chapter 20

Chase had felt strange lately, like she no longer had a place to call home. The den she shared with her family had felt unwelcoming for some time now, but she had been avoiding Yew as well, especially after her argument with Whorl. She felt it was best to stay away, in case Whorl did want to make a move on Yew. It rubbed her fur the wrong way, though she wasn't sure why. All she knew was that it was probably better she stayed away from Yew for some time so that her feelings could return to what they once were. They were bothering her lately. She could barely understand what she was thinking.

Meanwhile, her visits with Moonkit had been odd. The kit was not always wandering in the territory at the times Chase asked to meet her. She had been stood up twice now. Moonkit simply claimed she would forget, but Chase had picked up an odd scent on her lately. Then again, it might have just been FoxClan scent. Chase had trouble distinguishing the scents between cats. Perhaps Moonkit's companions just had a slightly different scent.

On a cool autumn day, however, Moonkit was in the same place she normally met Chase, which relieved her some. She had been lonely not visiting Yew for several sunrises. He had not made an effort to ask why she was avoiding him though, so she assumed he cared little about her absence. She was glad to see her friend again.

"I'm so glad you're here today," Chase said happily as she looked down at Moonkit.

The kit herself seemed more joyous lately. Her eyes sparkled a bit more, and she always flashed her pearl teeth in a smile at Chase whenever she came by. Chase had never seen the kit appear this lively.

"You've looked a lot happier lately," Chase noted. *"Is it because your apprentice ceremony is soon?"*

Moonkit nodded her head, then began to snicker.

"What else is it?" Chase wondered.

"I met someone," Moonkit said, letting out a girlish giggle that did not seem to suit her at all.

"What do you mean?" Chase wondered. *"You've made some new friends back in your clan?"*

"I met a rogue," Moonkit snickered. *"He's very handsome, and he's going to help me."*

"Help you with what?" Chase asked.

Moonkit glanced up, her eyes suddenly taking on a reddish gleam. It was gone in an instant, but Chase had sworn she'd seen scarlet in those normally bright green eyes,

"Nothing important."

"But...is that...is that allowed?" Chase wondered. She still knew little about clan policy, but it seemed that the cats usually liked to keep to themselves in their own clans.

"We're not mates, silly," Moonkit teased. *"But maybe one day..."*

Chase felt uncomfortable with this topic. Even she could tell that Moonkit was too young for romance. She felt it was better Moonkit focus on her training.

"But how did you meet him? How old is he?" Chase wondered.

"His name is Fang. He's a full-grown tom with brown fur and dark brown stripes. We met while I was in the woods one day," Moonkit explained.

Chase shuffled her paws. That didn't seem right.

"I would...be careful," Chase warned.

Moonkit rolled her eyes. Chase felt annoyed by the action. Moonkit

did not usually give her this type of attitude.

"It's not dangerous. What would you know about love? You said you didn't like that fox your sister did."

"I guess I did say that," Chase admitted, her mouth feeling dry. Who was she to judge Moonkit's love life? After all, she could barely admit to herself that she--

She didn't like anyone. That's what Chase had decided. That's why she didn't feel the need to be in Yew's constant presence. The initial throbbing from their separation only appeared numb now.

"I'll have to give you more updates," Moonkit said.

That was the length of their conversation. Chase's visits with Moonkit had once brought her unspeakable amounts of joy, but she was beginning to feel that same disappointment she felt with her family. She wanted to talk to Yew about it, but she didn't want to start another fight with Whorl. It seemed wrong to go visit him now.

Chase barely slept that night, her mind wide awake from thoughts that she could not comprehend. Her life had appeared to be going smoothly just a little while ago. Why did it feel like there had been a sudden shift?

She decided to go visit Moonkit the following afternoon. As she paced by the border, she heard a guttural cry in the distance, one that sounded so similar to the sound that kit had made when her father had forced Chase's siblings to kill it.

Chase's mind told her to stay away from the border and visit Moonkit another day, but curiosity got the better of her. She crept toward the FoxClan border and crossed it cautiously, afraid there may be cats nearby. Perhaps another clan was attacking! Was Moonkit out here? Chase needed to make sure she was safe if that truly was the case.

"Moonkit!" Chase called, wondering what sounds she had heard.

No response came, so she began to carefully walk along the border

of FoxClan and the rest of the woods, wondering if Moonkit was lingering somewhere around here. She neared where she had heard the sound. A thick clump of bushes lay ahead of her. Chase used her body to brush them aside and stepped out into a small clearing where a stream ran in the distance. She had not been in this part of the border before.

Chase's eyes fell to a cat--no, a body--in the distance. Bile rose in her throat at the sight, and she was suddenly transported back to that horrible day.

A silver she-cat lay near the stream, blood splattered across her beautiful pelt. Chase approached cautiously, horrified at the sight of the she-cat's unseeing eyes. There were multiple slashes across her pelt, and a pile of sticky blood had formed around her. Chase lightly touched it with her paw. The blood was still warm. She had been freshly killed.

Chase realized suddenly that this was Silverwhisker, Moonkit's mother. She let out a gasp of shock and stepped back. But what had happened to the she-cat? She peered forward, noticing ginger fur laying nearby. She paused. It was clearly fox fur, but...Chase had not smelled any other foxes around.

And when she took a sniff of the fur, she recognized her own scent. The fur had been strategically placed. One look at the slashes, and Chase could tell a cat had caused these wounds.

What if it had been the rogue Moonkit had met? Perhaps he was after Moonkit next!

"Moonkit!" Chase called, beginning to bound through the forest. She kept near the border, running through the brush in an attempt to find the she-cat. Moonkit would feel awful when she found out about her mother's death. Chase just hoped she could find her safely. She feared Moonkit may be in danger next.

She suddenly heard footsteps nearby. She peeked her eyes over the bushes, noticing a small silver-blue she-cat. Chase sighed in relief and leapt out of the bushes, directly in front of Moonkit.

She smiled at first, relieved to see that the she-cat was all right. Chase would have to lecture her about the dangers of going into the forest alone. She was going to tell her it was probably best they limit their meetings for the safety of Moonkit.

Then Chase's eyes fell down to Moonkit's paws.

They were red, stained with fresh blood. Chase's eyes widened, and she took a few steps back, disgusted with herself and the she-cat standing in front of her.

"Sorry, Chase. I've got to go," Moonkit told her, clearly looking in a hurry. It was no wonder. Chase narrowed her eyes, then felt her heart break altogether as she stared at her friend.

"Moonkit, don't tell me it was you," Chase breathed. She had thought she had found a unique friendship. Here was a cat willing to talk to her, to show her the ways of clan life. And she had completely twisted Chase's expectations.

"What are you talking about?" Moonkit asked nervously. Moonkit was not a good liar.

Chase was angry now, angry that she had been taken advantage of. Moonkit had never wanted for Chase to get what she wanted. Chase wasn't entirely sure what she had been to Moonkit, but they both clearly viewed each other differently. It was a shame to see the destruction of a she-cat that Chase had once thought would be so successful.

"It was you," Chase growled. *"I had high hopes in you, Moonkit. All this time I was trying to stop foxes from battling cats, but what I really should've been doing was stopping you from creating war."*

The friendship had shattered in an instant. Moonkit was clearly no longer putting on a disguise. Instead, she began moving forward.

"Move out of the way," Moonkit demanded.

And Chase was frightened. Those claws had been used for death. Moonkit had killed her own mother, and Chase was frightened that if she did not move, Moonkit would do the same.

Still, Chase held onto her dignity.

She looked at Moonkit one last time and let out a deep breath.

"I'm ashamed to know you," was what she said before leaping into the bushes. She did not turn her head or pause in her tracks to consider if what she was doing was right. Chase merely left the border with the intention of never returning. She never wanted to see the kit again.

Chase only made it a few steps before breaking down into tears. Her chest and shoulders heaved with vicious sobs. What if her father was right? What if cats were vicious? She had just met a kit, a mere kitten, that was capable of murder. What if that was all animals were like? What if they were only capable of destruction and death? Were there no kind souls in the world?

Chase felt as if she had been betrayed. Her friendship was shattered. Her glimpse into the feline world was gone. And now she had nothing. What was the point of continuing her dream if it had shattered at her first attempt?

Chase slowly gathered herself together, taking in deep breaths, suddenly remembering that she was not entirely alone. She never had been. She stood up, her eyes looking toward the stream in the distance.

I want to see Yew, she thought as she began racing off.

Chapter 21

Chase raced through the woods, rushing as fast as she could to Yew's residence. It barely occurred to her that he might be hunting or elsewhere in the woods. Yet she had to find him. He was the only other animal--fox or cat--she wanted to see right now.

The sting of Moonkit's betrayal caused her whole body to ache. Chase was still recovering from the incident herself. To think that Moonkit had killed her own mother was a disgrace. By that logic, she was no better than her father who had slaughtered that young kitten so long ago.

Perhaps this is the only way the forest is structured--through violence, Chase thought. From a young age, the foxes were taught to use violence to hunt. Violence was used for authority, for dominion, for power over others. Chase wondered if her view of life had been far too optimistic.

Chase leapt across the stream, rushing to Yew's den. The scent circulating from the area was stale, making her heart sink. Perhaps he was not here after all. And maybe...maybe he wouldn't care for what she had to say anyway. He had warned her to be careful after all, and look where it had gotten her.

"Yew!" she called nonetheless as entered his territory. The den was just ahead, and she raced in without a thought, finding the den completely empty.

Chase's heart sunk. She took a seat on the cold ground and let her shoulders slouch. A few more sobs wracked through her body, blocking out the pawsteps in the distance.

"Chase?" came a confused, yet relieved, voice.

Chase spun around, finding Yew standing at the entrance of the den. His eyes were gleaming with brightness as he stared at her. He hesitantly put his paw forward before rushing toward her.

"I'm so relieved you're okay!" he exclaimed. "I was going to look for you after not seeing you so long. I even got my family involved to help. I just came back from a visit to your own den, but your parents said you had stepped out."

Chase let out another harsh sob. So he had been caring about her all along? He had come to look for her despite the fact she had been avoiding him.

"What's wrong?" Yew asked calmly, taking a seat next to her.

"I can't go back to Moonkit anymore," Chase explained.

"Why not? Did something happen?" Yew wondered.

Chase dug her claws into the soil of the den. "She-she killed her mother."

Yew's eyes widened. "How did you find out?"

"I found a cat's body in their border and thought maybe something might have happened to Moonkit as well. But when I ran into her, her paws--" Chase broke off her speech as more cries erupted.

Yew moved in closer to Chase, his pelt gently brushing against hers. Chase pivoted her body so that her head was buried in the warm fur of his chest, and she let herself cry.

"I lost my friend," she whimpered.

"There are more cats," Yew murmured.

Another sob wracked through Chase's body.

"I think I understand," Yew said. "This goes farther than your friendship with Moonkit. You feel your relationships with cats are ruined. Your view has shifted."

"What if they're all like that?" Chase said quietly. "What if my father was right? That they're nothing but vicious beings. What kind of animal--any kind of animal--kills his or her own parent?! I feel disgusting. I feel like we're all the same, awful creatures. What if

my plan was wrong all along? Maybe cats and foxes aren't meant to get along."

"That's not true," Yew said, staring down at Chase. "There are good and bad cats. Just like there are good and bad foxes. Unfortunately, you happened to run into a cat who was not good-natured. You were so excited to meet a cat, to speak to a cat, that you simply took it upon yourself to worship the first one you knew. I'm older. I've spoken to more cats. And some are nice and kind. But some are evil. They fight and do awful things. To me, that sounds like how foxes act too. What you told me your father made your siblings do to that kitten sounds evil. But I, in no way, view you as possessing that same evil. Just like how I'm not looking at you any differently for being friends with a cat who turned out to be murderer.

"I don't want you to lose your dream. I think finding a resolution between foxes and cats is certainly possible. You will have those who agree with you and those who don't. You shouldn't let one bad experience keeping you from following that dream," Yew finished.

"I feel like it was my fault, like I could have stopped Moonkit somehow," Chase sniffed.

"That kit clearly seemed resolved to kill her mother either why. I'm not sure there was anything you really could do without hurting Moonkit," Yew explained. "Will you listen to what I said, though? I don't want this circumstance to stop you from living your dream. Because I would hate to see that. You've worked so hard to learn the cat language."

"I won't. I promise," Chase said, glancing up at him. She was beginning to have an idea of what the strangely rapid heartbeat in her chest meant. "Thank you, Yew. You've done a lot for me..."

"My pleasure," he replied, sweetly smiling at her.

"H-Has my sister visited you anytime lately?" Chase suddenly felt the urge to ask.

"Oh, Whorl? No. Where did that question come from?" Yew asked curiously.

Chase averted her gaze and shuffled her paws, sniffing a bit as the tears subsided. "I'm sorry I've been avoiding you. My sister and I got into a fight. It was kind of about you."

Yew chuckled. "About me? What about me?"

Chase glanced down at her paws. "I-I said I'd stay away for her sake, but I think I was also staying away to keep my own feelings bundled up. But I was really angry with Whorl, and I didn't know why until..."

"What are you trying to say, Chase?" Yew said in almost a teasing manner.

"You know what I'm trying to say, don't you?" she murmured.

"Yes, but why don't you say it out loud just so I'm clear?"

"I think I maybe...kind of...love you," Chase said quietly, almost hoping Yew wouldn't hear the words himself.

Her breath hitched as he pressed his snout against the side of her head and rubbed it gently. She stiffened, turning her eyes slightly.

"Y-Yew?"

"I love you, Chase," he said in return.

"You-you do?!" Chase exclaimed, standing up suddenly. "But why me? I'm sure there are plenty of other vixens around here who would suit you better. I'm a bit of a handful, if you couldn't tell already."

"I know that," Yew said, chuckling slightly. "Don't you think I already know that? I sent a bunch of foxes to search for you, after all. You're far different than any other vixen I've met. And you're the only one I could see spending my life together with." He now averted his gaze in the same flustered manner as Chase.

"Do you mean all that?" Chase asked.

"Of course. I've enjoyed spending time with you and admire

everything about you. That's why I've been so concerned for you lately. I don't want anything to happen to you," Yew confessed.

"I'm sorry to worry you," Chase said, tears beginning to fill her eyes again. "So does this mean..."

"Would you be my mate?" Yew asked.

Chase's breath hitched. It was sudden, and she was still young, but when she tried to imagine another fox to be with, she couldn't see anyone but Yew.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Yew smiled and nuzzled his head against hers. Chase's ears folded back and her eyes shut. She had not felt such joy before. To think that now she really could see Yew every day and discuss her wild plans with him was a sensational feeling.

"I love you," she whispered.

Chapter 22

A strip of sunlight coming into the den disturbed Chase's sleep in the morning. She lazily opened her eyes and let out a loud yawn, suddenly very aware of how close she was twirled around another fox. She paused for a moment, forgetting where she was until she realized with a gasp she was in Yew's den, sleeping curled up next to him.

She let out a tiny gasp of shock and sat up. Yew shuffled slightly but remained asleep. The rest of his family had returned to the den and were sleeping in their respective corners. Chase felt embarrassed all of the sudden until she remembered that she had agreed to become Yew's mate yesterday.

Chase let out a sigh and slowly slunk down to the ground again beside Yew. Her mind was racing to remember all the events that had occurred the day before. She had lost her friendship with Moonkit yet had gained a new mate. It was strange when she thought of how her morning the day before differed greatly.

Yew began pushing his muzzle against her, and Chase realized suddenly that he was awake.

"Good morning," he murmured quietly, his eyes glossed over from fresh sleep.

"M-Morning," Chase replied, moving aside as he sat up and stretched his body.

"Let's talk," Yew said, motioning her out of the den. Chase meekly followed and took a seat under a rather large pine tree next to him. Fresh dew had gathered on the forest floor, wetting Chase's paws.

"Your family is back," Chase noticed.

"Yes. You had already fallen asleep," Yew pointed out. "They were happy to see you were safe. I also told them about us."

"O-Oh! What did they think?" Chase asked nervously. She wasn't sure why her entire body was trembling. This was just Yew after all. How did becoming mates suddenly change her entire demeanor toward him?

"They were happy. They like you a lot, and they said that if Claw were still alive, he would be ecstatic," Yew shared.

"Oh, I'm glad," Chase murmured, feeling relieved that she at least had approval from Yew's family.

"Would you...would you be interested in staying in this part of the forest with me and my family?" Yew wondered. "I mean, eventually we could make our own den near the spring, but..."

"I'd love to!" Chase exclaimed. "If your family will have me, I mean."

"Of course. I wasn't sure if you wanted to stay closer to your own family--"

Chase cut him off with a frantic shake of her head.

"That's what I thought. But, we should probably go visit them. Your family hasn't seen you in over twenty four hours now. They might be worried," Yew stated.

The last thing Chase wanted to see was her family. She'd rather hide in Yew's den and never hunt near the meadow again, but she knew her family would be at least be curious about her whereabouts. It was probably best she broke the news to them. Her father had seemed ecstatic about his kits finding mates before. Perhaps it wouldn't be a large deal.

"Okay," Chase murmured quietly.

"We should head out now before they get too worried. We can hunt on the way back," Yew suggested. "And then we can talk all about our plans for peace between foxes and cats," he said excitedly, almost in a teasing manner.

Chase couldn't help but grin at this suggestion. "Sounds like a plan."

She walked nervously through the forest with Yew. She tried to remain calm by reminding herself that this was probably the last time she would have to take this path back to her own family's den. Chase might miss the tall grass of the meadow, but she would much rather stay with Yew deeper in the woods by the gurgling stream she had grown to love.

"It'll be okay," Yew assured her, sensing her anxiety.

Chase gave him a weak smile in return. Her stomach grew into knots when the dense trees became replaced by the meadow. She could see auburn fur standing out against the golden, brittle grass. Her family was already up for the day.

Chase had begun to move behind Yew. She expected him to tell her to stop hiding, but he allowed her to move slowly behind him. She saw her parents' ears prick up as they noticed Yew and Chase walking forward.

"Will your days' absences be a regular thing now?" Copper grumbled as Chase approached.

Great, he was already in a poor mood.

"S-Sorry," Chase murmured, stepping out from behind Yew to face her family. "Can you gather the others? I have an announcement."

Chase watched Whorl come to a pause near her and eye her with suspicion. Chase knew her sister would surely hate her after this announcement. After all, she had told Whorl nothing was going on.

"What's the matter, Chase?" Apple asked as she emerged from the den. Chase's two brothers began to gather around her too until the whole family was waiting for her to speak.

Chase opened her mouth, but Yew spoke before she could even get the chance.

"I asked Chase to be my mate yesterday, and she agreed," Yew explained.

Chase swore everyone's eyes widened at once.

"A-Are you sure this is what you want, Chase?" Apple asked cautiously. "You're still a bit young. You can wait until winter before you start considering mates."

"I'm very sure of this decision," Chase replied, watching Whorl's face contort in anger. Chase felt more sorrow than satisfaction at Whorl's reaction.

"Copper?" Chase asked, noticing his quiet reaction.

He was grumbling to himself, muttering nonsensical things. "Er, well, what do I care? I was the one who saw Yew and his family coming as a good thing, didn't I? Of course, I didn't expect him to choose *you,* but--"

Chase dug her claws into the earth, staring annoyingly at her father.

"I chose Chase because I love her," Yew argued. "I would not have any other vixen."

"Well, where do you plan to live?" Copper barked. "Your mother and I will probably have another litter of kits in the spring and we'll need help--"

"I'm staying with Yew and his family further in the forest," Chase explained. "I don't know why you'd want *my* help caring for them, but I'll be nearby if you truly need to see me."

"Well, fine. I guess I have no objections," Copper grumbled.

"Will you visit often?" Apple asked curiously.

"Probably not," Chase admitted. It was heartwarming her mother still thought Chase had some connection to this family. In all honesty, Chase didn't plan to see her family unless they ran into each other while hunting. It was not like she had been around here that much. She would sleep in her family's den but would usually be gone the next morning and be away majority of the day.

"Be safe," Apple said, her eyes filling with tears.

"I will," Chase said, standing her ground.

"We hope you're happy, sis," Hop said. Pounce was nodding beside him.

Chase turned to Whorl, but the fox only lifted up her snout and walked away. That was a calmer reaction than Chase was expecting. It still stung nonetheless.

Chase then turned to her father. He was averting his gaze as he grumbled to her, "Er, well, don't get into too much trouble, I guess. I don't really approve of most of your actions, but--"

"I don't need your approval," Chase growled, the sore spot between herself and her father still running deep. She wanted to scream obscenities of her father and blame him for the suffering he had caused her, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. "I'll see you around, I guess," was all she said as she began walking away, Yew following after her.

"That was awkward to witness," Yew murmured as soon as they had made their distance from her family.

"That's my family," Chase grumbled.

"Hey, cheer up. We're going home now," he said.

Home. Chase's own home had never felt much like one, but when she thought of Yew's warm den and his smiling family, she was finally ecstatic to feel what a loving den must be like.

"I'm glad they weren't too opposed," Chase murmured. "Even if they were, I wouldn't have listened."

Yew chuckled. "That sounds an awful lot like you."

Chase paused, realizing the FoxClan border was just to the left of her, past some brush. Yew must have realized this too, because he had gone deathly quiet near her. She took a shaky breath and felt Yew nudge against her.

"Come on. There will be plenty other opportunities for us to speak to the cats later. Why don't we get something to eat?" he suggested.

Chase nodded and moved away from the border. For a moment, she had been tempted to cross, though she was not sure why. She had sworn Moonkit would kill her if she returned. As she spun away, she felt she was fully breaking off her ties from the silver blue she-cat.

Chapter 23

Life felt more comfortable, and all the while, more strange, these days, for Chase. She was now living in Yew's den with his family, and while she still enjoyed hunting and exploring the forest, she never ventured near the meadow. Every once in a while, her paw extended toward the FoxClan border, but she had to remind herself there was nothing there for her anymore.

In the meantime, she spent her days with Yew. They hunted and explored and chatted. Chase wondered if this was what mates normally did. She had never expected to find a mate so early in her life. She was sure when her father discussed finding mates for his kits, he certainly didn't mean for Chase. Chase felt a bit triumphant moving out of her parents' den so soon.

"How about we catch a juicy rabbit for ourselves?" Yew suggested during their morning hunt. "It'll be winter soon, and prey will be scarcer to find."

"Do foxes really go hungry in winter?" Chase wondered.

"I forgot you haven't lived through a winter yet," Yew realized as he padded through the woods with her. "They're not so bad, not when you know how to hunt intelligently. But it'll take longer to find food. I bet you'll be amazed when you see the first snow of the season."

"Snow?" Chase had only heard stories about the mythical white substance that fell through the sky.

"It does ruin our camouflage," Yew pointed out. "But it's fun to play in. And cold too."

"Sounds like fun!" Chase exclaimed. She couldn't wait to spend winter with Yew and witness the first snowfall with him. She couldn't wait for spring, when they could watch the flowers bloom

together. She wasn't so sure if she was ready for kits so soon, but maybe she would be a mother once the snow melted.

It seems strange how quickly things have happened, Chase thought as she continued sniffing the air for prey.

She paused, realizing they were near the FoxClan border. Yew seemed unaware at first, continuing to track the scent of a nearby rodent. But at Chase's sudden halt, he must have realized.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring us this close," he admitted.

"It's okay," Chase murmured, trying not to stare at the bushes she would often cross to meet Moonkit around this time of day. She tried not to think about the she-cat. What that cat had done was wicked, and she shouldn't care what kind of consequences Moonkit faced because of it.

"We can stay away from this area from now on," Yew suggested.

Chase shook her head. "It's okay. I'm not so upset that I need to avoid the area entirely. I just hope I don't run into Moonkit or any other cat."

"Are...are you done with your plan?" Yew asked. He sounded saddened by this possibility, which caused Chase's heart to pound quicker. He wanted her to succeed. He always had.

"No," Chase said quickly, almost upset he had proposed this theory. "But I need a break. I would love to create peace. That has, and will always be, my goal. I don't want to speak to any cats right now though. Especially since my first and only interaction did not end well."

"That's understandable," Yew assured her. "Take as much time as you need. I want you to know, though, that not all cats are like Moonkit. I've spoken to enough to know they're not all ruthless murderers."

"Thank you. I know," Chase murmured.

Yew suddenly pricked his ears and bounded off into the bushes. She

peered forward curiously, listening to a scuffle in the foliage. Yew suddenly emerged with a plump rabbit, making Chase's mouth water almost immediately.

"Let's bring it back to the den and share," Yew said as he dropped the dead rabbit at her paws.

They were too hungry to make it to the den and ended up pausing by the stream. Chase ate happily as she listened to the gurgling water in the distance. It was much more peaceful these days now that she no longer had to return home to her family. She had always felt this sense of comfort around Yew, and now it had only grown since she had joined him in his den.

"So, let's talk strategy," Yew said as he swallowed a bite.

"Strategy for what?" Chase wondered. "How quickly I can get this rabbit down my throat?"

"About the cats!" Yew exclaimed.

"I was kidding, Yew," Chase responded dryly.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "You are kind of funny, aren't you? You're usually just so serious all the time that..."

Chase giggled. "It's fine, it's fine. But what do you want to discuss about the cats?"

"Well, your goal was essentially to befriend a cat and build up cat acquaintances from there, correct?"

"Essentially."

"Then, that's a possibility. But it shouldn't be a random kitten we find moping around the woods. It should be the leader, or deputy, perhaps."

"Deputy?"

"Second in line to the leader," Yew explained. "Do we need to review the clan line-up again?"

"No. I think I remember," Chase responded. "But how do we tell the leader or deputy apart from the others?"

"We're both fluent in the language. We can ask around, and we can explain our intentions. The only advantage to speaking to a kit is that they're at our mercy and won't try to attack. A warrior will not be as merciful. That's the one drawback. It will still take trust for a clan leader to even speak to us probably. But if we go in peacefully, even stay along the border and wait for a cat to come along, I think we could start building healthy relations," Yew suggested.

"But what clan would we choose?" Chase wondered. "Moonkit was a part of FoxClan, though they think a fox killed Moonkit's mother, unless she was caught, of course, so I'm not sure if that clan is our best bet."

"There's another clan called SnowClan nearby that's a bit larger than FoxClan. Perhaps we can try there!"

Chase felt a bit uneasy, wondering if there were secretive murderous kittens in SnowClan as well. Yew seemed enthusiastic though. She had to give him benefit of the doubt.

"I guess we could try. But I'm not ready yet."

"We don't have to meet with any clan cats until you're ready. I just wanted some sort of plan for when we do," Yew stated. "Claw would be so excited to know what we're doing! We're like the peacekeeper team or something."

Chase smiled slightly, hoping Claw was looking down on her. She had kept up her training with Yew after his death, and despite her fallout with Moonkit, was still actively practicing cat tongue. If she had kits with Yew someday, they would surely keep on the tradition.

"Thank you, Yew," Chase murmured.

"For what?" he asked, tilting his head.

"For just loving me unconditionally," Chase said. She watched a smile grow upon his face before he turned away, clearly flustered.

That was odd. She had never seen him act that way before.

"It-it's no problem! That's what mates are for, right?"

Chase chuckled. "I don't know about planning peace meetings between foxes and cats, but as for the love part, then yes, you're right."

Chapter 24

Chase moved through the woods with Yew, staring up at the swirling gray sky. The air had grown cold in the forest, and the trees were beginning to grow more and more bare with each passing day.

"I wonder if it will snow soon," Yew thought out loud as they went on an afternoon hunting trip.

Chase had never seen snow before. Yew told her that it was cold and fell from the sky. He explained it grew tiresome after a while, but the sight of snow for the first time was breathtaking as the forest became coated in white. Chase wasn't so sure she was ready for snow just yet. It seemed too soon for her to experience her first winter.

"I think I smell a rabbit in this direction," Yew said, leading her through some bushes.

Chase lifted her nose into the air, though she did not smell rabbit like Yew did. In fact, what she smelled didn't resemble prey at all. She stiffened slightly, then stomped lightly on Yew's paw.

"Stop," she warned, crouching down into the brush.

Yew did as he was told, though stared at her confusedly until his eyes fell on the movement peeking out on the other side of the foliage. Chase knew that scent had been familiar. It was the scent of FoxClan. But what were they doing out of their territory?

She noticed a group of cats, about five or six, making their way through the woods. They were lingering into the wild territory of the forest, straying from the FoxClan borders.

"What do you think is going on?" Yew asked.

"I don't know," Chase admitted, becoming concerned. "I want to investigate."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Yew wondered. "I'm not sure we should just march up to those cats and begin asking questions."

"The cats are already gone," Chase noticed, seeing they had disappeared farther into the forest. "I want to see if I can pick up on any cats saying anything. Let's head near the border."

"If you say so," Yew murmured, following behind her as she leapt out of the bushes.

Chase carefully padded through the woods. The stale scent of FoxClan lingered everywhere around here. She wondered if something had happened to their clan, and this was why they were out of their borders.

"I know you're concerned about Moonkit, but--"

"I'm not!" Chase practically shouted at Yew, cutting him off. She let her tail droop and sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm just genuinely curious. We're almost there anyway."

Yew grew quiet after that and obediently followed her. She paused behind a clump of trees, noticing a line of cats moving across the border. It looked as if the entire clan was following. There were mothers carrying kittens in their mouths and elderly cats limping away from their home.

"What's going on?" Yew asked, now appearing as concerned as Chase.

"Stay hidden," Chase said. "I'm going to try to get closer."

"Stay safe."

Chase moved swiftly and quietly through the woods until hiding behind a large bush closer toward where the cats were migrating. She lifted an ear, hoping to pick up on just an ounce of conversation.

"This is all Moonpaw's fault," she heard a nearby ginger tom murmur as he walked alongside another.

"You should call her Moonstar. What if she's listening?" a pale ginger she-cat behind him asked nervously.

Moonstar? Chase thought. Moonkit had gone on to become an apprentice, but now she was referring to herself as a leader? It had only been a couple months since that day they had broken off their friendship. How much had changed in that time?

"Sunstar should have conducted an investigation into her mother's death. It took the death of Owlpaw for Sunstar to realize that Moonpaw--no, Moonstar--was behind all the killing," the ginger tom continued to grumble. Chase was slowly following him alongside the bushes, desperate to hear more of the conversation.

"To be fair, that rogue she's mates with killed Silverwhisker. Moonstar could have lied about that death if Sunstar suspected her, but she had a witness when she killed her own brother," the she-cat continued to say.

"She should have been exiled before that. Or dare I say, executed. Because now we're in this mess. FoxClan is small and has not been along for long, but now it's being threatened. This whole forest is being threatened now that SnowClan has been drawn along in this battle too. MoonClan...what a stupid concept," the tom continued to grumble.

"I don't know if you should keep mumbling about Sunstar doing a poor job, Foxeye. She probably won't like her deputy saying such things behind her back," the she-cat warned. Foxeye went quiet, and continued walking. Chase continued to move alongside them, surprised they had not picked up on her scent just yet.

The she-cat let out a sigh. *"It's a shame really, all that's happened. I don't think Silverwhisker took very good care of her daughter. Her mate's absence probably didn't help."*

"Don't blame it on the mother. Blame it on the she-cat," Foxeye growled. *"Owlpaw turned out fine, didn't he? And now he's dead."*

"Yes, but how is Moonstar able to rage war when she just gave birth to

four kits of her own? I doubt she's caring for them. And that mate of hers is much older, and a bit frightening," the she-cat continued.

"Well, as small as her 'clan' is, it's posed a threat. Why does she want this forest to herself so much anyway? I think it's all a ploy to weaken us. I've talked this over with Sunstar. A battle is imminent."

"That's what I feared too," the she-cat replied.

Chase backed up slowly, having heard more than enough. Apparently a few months apart from Moonpaw had been enough to turn her into an all-out monster. There was too much information for Chase to process all at once. So Moonpaw hadn't "killed" her mother, instead hiring that tom to do it for her, but why had her paws been stained like that? Her brother, that small brown tom that Chase had saved, had been slaughtered at her claws, and now she was running her own clan and raising kits of her own.

Chase quickly ran into the direction of Yew, nearly rushing into him as she turned a tree.

"I found you!" he exclaimed. "I was growing worried. Chase, what's wrong?"

Chase let her legs sprawl out from under her and dipped her head as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"The clans are leaving," she announced. "And it's all Moonpaw's doing."

"What?"

Chapter 25

Never fear, my children. I bring you an update after three weeks. Things are getting quite busy as I finish up this semester. In good news, these chapters will begin being published weekly the second week of May, so no more do you have to torment the bimonthly updates that occur during the school year

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Chase paced around Yew, slowly trying to take in all the information she had gathered from her eavesdropping session. Yew waited patiently and tilted his head, waiting for her to elaborate further.

"I don't understand. What has Moonkit--er, Moonpaw--done?" Yew asked.

"The cats are leaving because of her," Chase said, finally pausing her movements. She turned and stared at Yew, her breath catching in her throat. "She's a monster."

"I-I don't understand. She's so young. How could she be responsible--"

"Sometimes I think I should have killed that kit, like a fox should do," Chase murmured as she took a seat on the forest floor. "Apparently she did not kill her mother with her own claws, but the rogue she was associating with--her mate now--was hired to do the deed. Still, she must have had some part in it. I remember the blood on her paws clearly. She goes by Moonstar now, too."

"Moonstar?" Yew asked.

"Apparently Moonstar also killed her brother, Owlpaw. He was the other kitten I saved, and apparently an angel compared to his devilish sister. I assume she was exiled from the clan, and now she's apparently made her own clan and is threatening war on FoxClan

and another clan nearby called SnowClan," Chase explained.

Yew's eyes widened in shock. "Killing your family like that? It's sickening," he said, shivering slightly. "But how much of a threat does she pose? She's just one she-cat."

"A she-cat who killed her mother and brother and now is running her own clan called MoonClan. Clearly she has power if she can force the cats from their clans. They must not feel safe," Chase explained. "She's vicious, and I'm assuming the cats she'll get to join her will possess that same attitude." Chase froze slightly, remembering one more detail that rubbed her the wrong way. "She-she has four kits now."

"That young?!" Yew exclaimed.

"I bet she's not taking great care of them," Chase murmured. "I don't think her mother was that good towards her, so she has no example of how to parent. Maybe I should..."

"Should what?"

"No. It's stupid," Chase murmured.

"You wanted to rescue them and raise them?" Yew asked, chuckling slightly. He coughed and corrected himself, as if he weren't mocking Chase's idea.

"It's dumb. You can laugh," Chase said, averting her gaze. "Even if I can communicate with them, it's better they're with cats. Maybe someone else will come along and help. I hope there are at least some good-spirited cats out there."

"I'm sorry, Chase. I didn't expect you to find out so much. She's a truly awful cat, not like any I've met before," Yew said quietly, shuffling his paws in the dirt.

Chase let out a long sigh and stood. It was finished. Her dreams of aiding the cats. She had the chance to bring some justice by slaughtering Moonstar, but she had hesitated. Her father wouldn't have. Maybe...maybe he was right in ways. Either way, the cats were leaving.

"Let's just go home," Chase decided.

"Are you sure?" Yew asked.

She nodded, wanting to forget about cats for a while.

...

Within a few days, the cats that had once occupied the woods and caused such annoyance to the other animals of the forest had vanished without a trace. Their stale scent was already gone, and the forest seemed to have more prey than before. Chase assumed her father was happy and that the other predators in the area were overjoyed. She was content eating a bit more, especially because it was getting colder.

Still, Chase missed the cats terribly. Her guilt over failing to stop Moonstar grew each day, and she thought again and again of what had brought her to Yew. They said they were going to change the mindset of the forest by uniting cats and foxes. But now the cats were gone before any conversation had taken place.

The forest was peaceful, sure, but Chase felt she had lost her purpose. She still had Yew, of course, and she loved him with all her heart, but she also had a passion. Living as a simple fox had never done much for her. Many other vixens would be content living with their mates and raising some kits in the spring, but that had never been the life for Chase and Yew.

Chase felt more confined to the den these days. She and Yew would still go out to hunt and walk around the woods, but there was not much else to do. He reminded her of the snow that would soon come and the entertainment that could bring, but it was still awhile away, and Chase had little to do in the freetime.

One afternoon, Chase sat near the entrance of the den, watching as clouds and fog took over the forest. It was entrancing watching the way the fog rolled through the hills and left bits of dew on the plants and ground. Yew had gone out for a morning hunt, though Chase had not been hungry and let him go alone. His parents and siblings had done the same, and she was alone.

Hearing footsteps, Chase pricked her ears, watching Yew return with a dead rabbit in his jaws. He walked past her and set the rabbit near her.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Not really," Chase murmured, her eyes still glued to the thick fog.

"Chase," Yew said, catching her attention. She turned and stared at him, noticing suddenly the concern in his eyes. He had not been speaking to her lately with that same enthusiasm they initially shared. She had thought maybe he was angry, but he only looked saddened.

"I'm worried about you," Yew said gently.

"I'll be fine," Chase responded, turning her head back to gaze at the forest. "What do you think it was like living at home?"

"I know it's disheartening that the cats have left. That was your dream," Yew said, scooting closer to her so that their fur was brushing. "It was mine too. At least you made it mine. Claw saw potential in you. He wanted you to use your talents to change the forest."

"Well, it seems Moonstar did that for me. Now there are no cats to bother us anymore," Chase grumbled.

"Then...then we'll find a new forest," Yew suggested.

Chase turned her head, staring at him in shock.

"Well, we have to keep up the language somehow, right?" Yew said, taking a bite of rabbit.

"Are you serious?" Chase asked. "*Leave here?* But this has been my home, and you only just moved here from another forest. It would be dumb, wouldn't it? Chasing after cats like that. You would have to leave your family, and so would I."

"Is that a problem for you to leave here and your family?" Yew asked.

"N-No," Chase murmured. "I've always liked exploring, but I don't want to drag you with me. We were just settling down and--"

"It doesn't matter to me," Yew argued. "I'll go wherever you go. I don't like seeing you depressed like this. I want you to fulfill your dream. I want to make that happen for you. So in a few days, let's get out of here and find some more cats, solve problems in a different forest. What do you say?"

"Are you sure, Yew?" Chase asked quietly.

"It's not a burden at all. I'm a grown fox. You're almost a grown one as well. What's keeping you here?"

"Nothing in particular, I suppose," Chase realized.

"Then, let's do it! Let's get out of here and explore!" Yew stated excitedly.

Chase smiled at him, feeling the slightest bit of tears gather in the corner of her eyes.

"Yes, let's," she said happily, smiling for the first time in what felt like forever. "I love you, Yew."

"I love you, too. I want to do whatever I can to keep you happy," he said, nuzzling against her.

"When would we go?" Chase asked.

"In a few days' time, I guess. I'll need to tell my parents. You'll probably tell yours." At the sight of Chase's annoyed face, Yew added, "Or not. But we might be able to pick up a scent or two and follow it. We can explore the cats' territories, get a feel for how they live. It'll help us with our mission."

Chase smiled warmly at him. "Sounds like a plan."

Chapter 26

The scent of cat had was not even stale. It was just gone. Chase would sometimes lift her nose, always wanting to pick up just a bit of that scent but always being disappointed when she only smelled the autumn wind, perhaps mixed with a bit of squirrel.

She and Yew planned to leave in a few days. He had already told his family, and though they were saddened to see the young couple leave, they wished him luck in another forest. Chase had been lingering around, pushing off telling her family. Yew had insisted she do it by the end of the next day or else he would drag her over there himself.

Chase proposed she would do it in the morning, as the sun was already beginning to set. Yew had returned from a hunting trip with a dead rabbit in his jaws.

As they shared the meal, Yew paused.

"The camps are almost certainly abandoned by now. Why don't we go look at them?" Yew suggested.

Chase tensed. There was no harm. After all, the cats were gone, but she had not stepped into that territory since her last encounter with Moonstar. She had not intended on returning.

"Or we don't have to," Yew proposed after seeing her panicked expression.

"No. No, I want to," Chase said. "It might give us some more insight into how the cats live. I've never really explored the territory myself. Let's go after we finish our meal."

With only shards of rabbit bone remaining, Chase and Yew were on their way back to FoxClan territory, a place Chase had not ventured into since she had seen that young kit with blood stained on her paws. Her stomach twisted in knots as she approached the border,

and she wondered suddenly if she might turn back. They were in FoxClan's territory before Chase had even realized it. The scent had altogether vanished.

"Do you know which way their camp is?" Yew asked.

Chase shook her head. "Moonk--I mean, Moonstar--and I usually lingered closer to the border."

"Well, we'll find it," Yew replied. They explored the territory together, finding not much different from their own. The only uniqueness in a clan's territory would have to be the camp, though she and Yew were at a loss at how to find it. It must have been hidden for a reason, Chase supposed.

"The plants have been stomped away here," Yew noticed. "This was a common taken path. Maybe the camp is just up ahead."

Chase lingered behind him until they came to a thick wall of brush. Yew used his broad shoulders to part it aside, letting out a gasp before Chase managed to enter herself.

"What is it? What do you see?" Chase asked.

"Follow," Yew said, and Chase leapt through the bushes, finding on the other side a clearing several dens lined its circumference.

It looked like it might have been lively at one point. Chase could imagine cats basking out in the sunlight or eating prey from what was now only a discarded pile of bones. Even if the cats had left prey behind, other predators must have gotten ahold of it by now.

Yew was busy peering into one of the larger dens. There were nests made of moss lined along the cold den floor. Many cats must have slept in these dens together.

Chase peered into another smaller den finding decaying and dried up herbs lining along.

"This must have been a medicine cat den," Yew realized.

"Medicine cat?" Chase asked. She had recalled hearing the term

before, but she didn't quite remember their purpose.

"They healed the other cats," Yew stated. "I bet if we go to the end of dens, we'll stumble upon the leader's den."

Chase followed behind him and peered at a smaller den with only one nest inside. Yes, it most certainly belonged to a leader. Chase wondered if Moonstar had a den like this of her own where she could sit and command cats all day. Chase shuddered at the thought.

"They live much more communally than foxes," Chase realized.

Yew nodded. "Definitely."

"Do you think it would be less lonely living as a community like that?" Chase wondered.

"What do you mean?"

"Living like one big family? Before I met you, I was pretty lonely. It must be nice always having the ability to meet new cats and interact with each other," Chase thought.

"I suppose, but I don't think it would work that way," Yew stated. "Take us, for example. We're leaving for new territory soon. Clans can't really do that. They're bound to the same land unless something drastic happens. I think there's a lot more freedom as a fox."

I suppose, Chase thought. She had loved exploring since she was younger, and she was thrilled to move onto a new forest soon, but a part of her wanted that sense of community she had never really felt with her own family.

The sun had almost completely descended by now with just a bit of light still shining over the forest. Chase was about to suggest they go back, but Yew had taken off in another direction.

"Where are you going?" Chase asked as she followed behind him.

"I want to see how far their territory stretches," Yew honestly

replied.

Chase was tired and wanted to return back, but she followed behind him, not wanting to bring Yew down. After all, he was making so many sacrifices for her already. She could let his natural curiosity take over this evening.

The woods were becoming sparser for some reason, and when Chase brushed past some more foliage, she found herself at a strange intersection. More forest lay on the other side of this blank space. Chase pressed her paw against the ground that was clearly not forest soil.

What is this? she thought curiously. She remembered her mother warning her about a specific predator before, one that was scarier than all others. But she could not recall the name exactly.

"Humans built this," Yew answered when he noticed her curiosity.

Humans. That was what they were called.

"What is it?" Chase asked.

"I don't know. I never encountered it when I was traveling across the woods, but I think the cats call it a 'thunderpath.'"

"A thunderpath? Why is that?" Chase asked. "It's not roaring like thunder would."

"Well, maybe we should head back before we find out," Yew stated. "I think this is where the territory ends anyway. Unless..." He ventured further out onto the thunderpath, leaving Chase to wait nervously by the side.

"What are you investigating?" she asked.

"Maybe there's another clan on the other side," Yew suggested. "We can check that out tomorrow, do you think?"

There was a strange ringing in Chase's ear, and the forest appeared just a bit brighter. She was nodding her head vigorously, trying to motion Yew near her.

"Well, we'll look then," he decided, beginning to walk back across the vast space toward her. Chase was relieved and ready to head back to their den and rest.

But the sound was growing louder, and Yew paused to prick his ears up as it grew. Had her mother warned her of something else that the humans did as well? Something to do with...

And they sit in scary monsters on this loud road.

Something massive in size, larger than Chase had ever seen, was roaring as it came close. Its eyes were bright and glowing, practically blinding Chase as it came closer. She turned to flee, but Yew was still out there, she realized.

"Yew!" she called. It was so bright she could barely see, but she heard his footsteps, now rapid, until there was a sudden yelp and a crunch and whatever the monster was was rolling off into the distance.

Chase's heart was pounding, and her legs were trembling. Her vision was coming back, but she couldn't hear Yew. Then, the scent of blood infiltrated her nose.

"Yew!" she called, suddenly noticing the lump on the thunderpath. She rushed toward it, finding herself stepping in puddles of sticky blood.

She shoved her paws against her mate. "Yew! Yew!" she was practically screeching.

He was unresponsive, and his body felt broken as she shoved against it. She suddenly realized that the crunching sound had most likely been his bones.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she refused to believe what she saw in front of her. He was injured, maybe, but she could heal him somehow. If only he would just wake, but he would not budge no matter how hard she tried.

Her throat was hoarse from calling his name. The painful reality had set in. She wanted to sit in the road and cry, but she was afraid

another scary monster would be on her trail and get her next time. She grabbed Yew by the scruff, lugging his heavy body back into the forest.

Then, she was digging, more than she had ever done in her life. She was quiet, letting a few more tears fall, as she dug a hole to place him in. His body was starting to lose its warmth, confirming once and for all that he was dead.

She placed him inside, staring at his face one last time. She licked a bit of blood from his fur before kicking the dirt back into the hole. There was a slight lump in the ground, which she collapsed on upon finishing her job. The sobs returned harder this time as she cradled the lump of dirt beneath her. She glanced at her paws, noticing the dried blood staining them, just as they'd stained Moonstar's, except this hadn't been her own doing. Or had it? Why had she not called him back sooner? Then...

Chase did not care anymore. The wind was cold, and surely her den, if she could even call it that anymore, would shelter her, but she could barely move a paw, and her body felt heavy with sorrow. She shut her eyes, crying herself to sleep over her broken heart.

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plz dont hurt me

Chapter 27

Hopefully you are all recovering from last chapter. I have received several comments asking why I decided to kill Yew off, and I will not disclose yet because I hope by the time the novel is complete that it will make more sense. It's not a direct answer, if that's what you're expecting, but it more has to do with a combination of plot, character development, and the overall themes expressed in this novel. I plan out all my novels ahead of time, so this wasn't a decision on a whim. If you've read *The Cat and the Fox* which includes more of older Chase, you would have probably already seen this coming since he is absent in that novel. I know in some of my works from 6-8 years ago I liked to include a lot of pointless deaths, but I feel I only kill off characters for specific reasons these days. Thanks again for all your support!

"It's cold today," Chase murmured as she stood in the stream. She was washing the dried blood from her paws, almost forgetting for a moment why they had been stained.

Though the blood had all but vanished in the stream's crystal clear waters, Chase remained standing, though the day was cold. The trickling of the river and the autumn leaves breaking off from branches to sway downward made her feel less alone.

When she could no longer bear the frigid water, Chase exited the stream and shook off her pelt. Her gaze looked ahead at the den she and Yew had once called home. Now she felt no need to ever cross the stream again. After all, it had been Yew's family that had found her cradling the mound of dirt that had become Yew's grave. Chase had fled before they got too sentimental.

The tears had all been shed the night before. When Chase awoke in the morning, confused why she had slept in the forest before reality set in, she felt nothing but numbness.

The morning sun had soon become covered by gray sheets of clouds with the onset of an autumn storm. She had no doubt it would rain before too long, but instead of seeking shelter, she had been meandering in the forest, trying to rack her brain around her new reality and what she now planned to do.

Her gaze turned toward the path that led to the meadow. She growled to herself, not wanting to see the face of her family. She was afraid they'd mock her, or worse, pity her.

I can't stay, Chase told herself. This forest housed too many scarring memories. She had come to the conclusion that she would travel, just as she and Yew had planned, but she'd do so alone.

Though Chase wanted to remain standing, her feet began dragging her toward the meadow. She had barely seen her family since becoming mates with Yew, and she had never told them of her plan to leave. That had been her task for today, though Yew was not here to remind her. She supposed she owed it to him to talk to them.

The path she had once walked as a young kit became familiar. She remembered peering through bushes and climbing up on rocks to get a glimpse of the cats that wandered through the woods. She remembered sneakily entering the border to visit Moonkit, who had been a friend at the time. She remembered her lessons with Claw while Yew fondly looked on, probably already in love with her at that point. Chase shut her eyes, finding that the tears were rising again. She slashed her tail, trying to focus on her mission. It was time to speak to her family.

As soon as she began to wander through the tall grasses that were beginning to die with the slow onset of winter, she could see auburn shapes in the distance. As her footsteps became more audible, two foxes quickly turned their gaze and folded their ears back. Her brothers, Chase realized. Their ears perked back up when the siblings recognized their sister.

"Chase?" Hop asked confusedly. "We never expected a visit from you."

"Mom, Dad, Chase is here!" Pounce called.

Chase was quiet, trying to avert any eye contact with her family.

"Are you okay?" Hop asked.

Chase had no time to reply. Her parents were coming out of the den. Apple was rushing forward in relief, though Copper only seemed annoyed.

"I was wondering when you would visit! We were worried you'd been eaten by a bear," Apple said. She seemed relieved and joyful to seem her daughter. Chase couldn't return the sentiments.

"And how is life with your mate?" Copper asked, almost mocking her as he said it.

"Yew is dead," Chase said bluntly.

Whorl had exited the den to join the crowd just as Chase had uttered those words. The foxes all fell deathly silent, staring at Chase in complete shock. A few shuffled their paws, not sure how to react.

"Oh, dear," Apple said first. "But how--"

"He was hit by one of those human monsters," Chase stated.

"When?" Copper asked, now looking concerned.

"Last night," Chase said.

Their eyes widened even more.

"Does his family know?" Apple asked.

"Yes," Chase answered. "I will no longer be living with them."

"I would have thought they'd be begging for you to stay," Copper grumbled.

"They did offer. I declined," Chase said.

"Well, you're more than welcome to return here, dear," Apple said. "After all, you did promise to help in the spring when we have another litter. I suppose you won't have any running around, but..."

Chase winced at her words. It was hard to imagine her future with Yew had vanished in such a short time.

"No," Chase said.

"Where else would you live?" Whorl interrupted. Despite the sour attitude she had given Chase for months, she looked saddened and concerned. "Come home. It'll be okay."

"I'm not coming home. I won't," Chase said.

"You'll die if you live on your own," Copper growled.

"Funny. I've been doing that for a while now, haven't I?" Chase asked. "I will be living on my own because I'm leaving this forest."

Apple's eyes widened. "Chase, you can't be serious."

"I am serious. Yew and I were planning to move to a new forest anyway. I suppose his death just made the decision easier. I don't want to stay here. There are too many memories," Chase explained.

"You promised--" Copper growled.

"I'm sorry. I have to go back on that promise," Chase said, staring at her family. She then turned to Copper, glaring at him. "However, I feel I owe nothing to you. You can blame me all you want for Rush's death, though you all seem to live fine without her. But," Chase said, stepping closer to him, "What you did to me as a kit--trying to force me to kill an innocent kitten--was out of line. I'm sorry my siblings could never see past your selfish ego, but I stayed away for a reason. I never felt loved around you."

Copper stared at her, blinking in disbelief. He was about to open his mouth to say something in response, Chase guessed, but Apple spoke up. Her throat was hoarse, as if she were on the verge of tears.

"What does she mean, Copper?" she asked innocently.

Chase suddenly felt guilty for never going directly to her mother when the incident first occurred.

"I--she--well," Copper stammered, unable to find the right words.

"I'm leaving," Chase repeated, looking at her family again. "And I won't be back. Don't pretend to act saddened. Was I ever much in your life to begin with? Don't look at me like that, Whorl. Weren't you telling me to stay away from Yew just a few months ago?"

"I'm sorry," Whorl whimpered.

"I don't want your pity. I've gotten along fine on my own, haven't I?" Chase asked.

Apple was full on crying now. Her shoulders heaved as droplets of water fell from her eyes. Chase placed her tail on her mother's shoulder in a manner of comfort.

"I'm sorry, Mom. This is what's best for me," Chase said.

Her mother nodded, seemingly understanding. Chase glanced up, looking at her family one more time.

"Farewell. Good luck to all of you," Chase said. She turned around, trying to ignore the sounds of tears and arguments that begin to arise as soon as she began to walk. She didn't dare look back, feeling her heart had broken a little bit itself from the interaction.

Chapter 28

Chase's stomach grumbled as she wandered through the unfamiliar woods. She knew already that winter would be arriving soon. The lack of prey, cold wind, and rarely sunny skies were sign enough. The last few leaves were beginning to fall off the trees, leaving part of the forest exposed and bare.

She had been gone a few days already, and though it was tough not having a den to call her home, she much preferred it to staying. Though Yew's parents had offered to house her, she had denied them, mostly due to the guilt over Yew's death. At night she still dreamt of ways she could have prevented it.

When Chase was not thinking of Yew's unfortunate death, she thought of the words she shared with her family. Sometimes she would be upset with herself for being so harsh toward them, especially her mother. But she was also proud to be able to stand up to them, especially her father. He had once warned her as a kit not to speak up, but she had done so anyway a few days ago, and she hoped he was paying the consequences for what he did to scar her so long ago.

Chase was not entirely sure where she was going, only that it needed to be far from her home. She didn't want to risk the chance that she would run into any family members or any kin of Yew's for that matter.

What Chase desired most of all was to find another forest bounding with cats. She knew the conflicts between cats and foxes existed everywhere, and while she was unable to do anything in her birth forest, perhaps she could make peace somewhere else. That was what she and Yew had planned anyway, and she intended to follow through with that plan.

As the nights grew colder, Chase awoke one morning to see little wisps of white floating through the air as the sun rose in the distance. She paused a few moments, remembering at last what it

was this strange occurrence was called.

Snow, she realized.

Not too long ago, she and Yew had dreamed about seeing the first snow together. He had already experienced this winter event before, but Chase had not. It was going to special. They were going to stand under the sky as bits of white frost coated their auburn pelts.

Chase felt numb as she stood underneath the snow. It was a beautiful sight to behold, but she felt she could not take as much joy in it as before. She watched her pelt become speckled with the substance and noticed it had begun sticking to the ground. It would not be long before travel would become more difficult.

Chase longed to go curl back up inside the log she had taken shelter in for the evening. For the first time in a while, she wanted to cry as she watched the snow fall. It painfully reminded her of Yew. However, Chase had a mission to fulfill, and she knew she didn't have time to waste crying alone in the woods. So she persisted.

She was forced to take shelter earlier into the day, as the snow was beginning to fall harder, and when Chase awoke the next morning, the forest was coated in a sparkling white blanket. Her eyes widened in surprise as she stared at the environment around her. The snowy woods was a sight to behold.

As Chase stepped out into the snow, she felt her paw sink into the thick powder and quickly pulled out her paw, cursing to herself. Travel would be much harder now, prey would be scarce, and to top it all off, her pelt stuck out greatly against the white sheet. She would have to travel in more dense areas, she realized.

The winter months began, and that was the only time that Chase considered if it had been wrong leaving home. Her stomach was often grumbling these days. She still managed to get by, but she definitely never felt satisfied after a meal. Some of the streams she could cross, but the ice was slippery, she learned quickly, and eventually she stopped trying to cross water after her foot broke through the ice and was painfully cold the rest of the day.

Though the big prey that her parents often told stories about was asleep during this time of year, there were still other foxes that often growled when Chase ventured too far into their territory, and every once in a while, Chase to flee on foot from a few humans that had ventured too far into the woods for her liking. But for the most part, she was safe.

That was not to say Chase didn't feel lonely. She had been out traveling for a full moon cycle already and was not sure when she would bring her quest to an end. A part of her liked the adventure. She had always dreamed about running off and exploring as a kit. But with Yew no longer beside her, Chase felt pretty bored with only her own thoughts to entertain her.

One day, Chase miraculously got the whiff of a familiar scent. It was one that had often lingered through the woods, and one she was very familiar with when she became closer friends with Moonstar.

There are cats nearby, Chase realized.

The scent was stale, but it was a sign of hope. And judging by its familiarity, Chase wondered if these were the same cats that had fled her forest in the fall. Then again, her nose might not have been skilled enough at distinguishing cats by clan, but it was definitely a familiar scent that was now invading her nose.

For the next few days, Chase followed in the direction of that scent, hoping it would lead her somewhere. She had been wandering around in unfamiliar territories for what felt like an eternity.

That was until she stepped in a particularly dense forest that seemed filled with life despite the fact winter was ongoing. It had a homely feel, and if Yew had been traveling with Chase, she was sure he would admire it just as much as she was admiring it currently.

The vast forest and environment that seemed perfect for inhabiting had another perk though. The scent of cat was strong, and when Chase lifted her nose, she could make out a few scents that distinguished different smells of cat from each other. There were

clearly territories marked here, just as there had been back home.

And on top of that, there was a strong scent of FoxClan lingering through these woods. It seemed that Chase had just managed to track down the clan that had fled the same woods as her.

Chapter 29

Chase lifted her nose to the air, finding the scent of FoxClan to be overwhelming. It was intermixed with a few other scents, one she supposed had belonged to the other clan that had been in the old forest with FoxClan. There was another scent lingering though, one that faintly smelled like blood, that she could not quite put her paw on.

Do I look for the cats around here? Or should I just go find a place to make a den? Chase wondered. She did not know the boundaries here like she had known them in her old forest. The last thing she wanted was a bunch of cats attacking her as her welcome into these new woods.

"There must be foxes nearby," Chase murmured. "Maybe they'll know."

Chase tried to distance herself from the FoxClan scent instead, though it did little to help, because the scent of a different group of cats replaced FoxClan's. Chase knew there had to be unoccupied territory somewhere for her to rest. She supposed for now she would linger around the woods, being careful not to cross any borders the cats might have put down.

Chase pricked her ears as she heard a bit of mewing in the distance. That must have meant there were cats nearby. It should have signaled for her to move on and create more distance, but it calmed her some, being in the presence of cats again. It made her feel more at home and more like herself again.

Chase couldn't help but approach a little bit more, especially when she found that the mewing sounded like it belonged to younger cats, ones that surely would not be able to do much damage to her if they felt threatened. Chase's brain was willing her to turn away, especially since her last friendship with a cat had gone to flames, but Chase's legs continued pulling her forward. She didn't mind just a peak after all.

A foreign, strange scent had invaded the area. Chase's heart began to pound when the original friendly mews turned into yowls and screeches. There was definitely a cat or more in danger!

Without even thinking, Chase began racing toward the noise, hoping she would not be too late. She silently prayed it was not a fox that was unleashing an attack. That was not how she intended her first meeting to go with the foxes around here--her breaking up an attack between the two predators.

The voices were becoming clearer now, and Chase could definitely recognize the voice of a kit saying, "*Hey! Don't do that to my friends!*"

The scent of blood filled the air, making Chase feel sick to her stomach. It smelled like that day her father had forced them to kill the kit and the day that Moonstar had murdered her own mother. But if Chase could change the tides today, perhaps that smell would not appear as sickly to her.

The fight scene was close, just beyond a thick clump of bushes. With some common sense still left in her, Chase decided to get a quick look at the situation before taking part herself. She peeked forward, trying to hold back a gag.

There were four cats total--three small kittens and a youthful white tom. A white and gray speckled kitten was lying limp on the forest floor as blood pooled out around her. There was a concerned looking tom, presumably the limp kit's brother, Chase guessed by his similar appearance, only he as speckled with black and white, standing next to the limp kit. Chase watched in shock as the last kit, a brown tabby she-cat, launched herself at the white tom, clawing his eye. The white tom quickly threw her off, letting out a hiss in pain as he did so. Then, once he got his bearings, he stood tall and looked about to pounce.

He'll kill them, Chase realized.

Without thinking, she leapt out of the bushes and bared her teeth at the tom. The kits looked shocked, though not as terrified as the tom. Chase thought a battle would ensue, but the tom, with his

bloody white paws, took one look and ran off, leaving Chase alone with the three kits. They were staring at Chase and trembling, probably concerned that they would be her next meal.

"Are you okay?" Chase asked them.

"How are you speaking cat?" the brown tabby wondered.

"My name is Chase. I learned your language from another fox," Chase explained. Not having much time to make proper introductions, she moved forward to inspect the limp kit. It only took her one glance to realize that the kit was on death's edge. Chase figured there was little she could do to save her.

"What are you doing?" the tom asked.

"Looking over her wounds," Chase answered, not ready to tell the kits yet that their friend had little time left. If only she had gotten there sooner, before that vicious male had attacked. His scent was different from these cats, and Chase guessed he belonged to a different clan.

"Smokekit, what do we do?!" the brown tabby cried.

Smokekit was crying as he peered over his sister. Chase was truly trying to believe that the wounds weren't too deep, but even if they weren't, the little kitten lying in the pool of blood had lost too much blood as it was.

"I-I don't know!" Smokekit shouted.

I've failed again, Chase thought. *I wasn't able to stop my siblings from killing that kitten. I wasn't able to stop Moonstar from murdering her mother. And now I've failed to rescue another kitten lost to violence.*

"I don't think there's anything I can do," Chase admitted. She slowly laid down and extended her paws on either side of the tiny kitten, staring down at her concernedly. The kit was wheezing, trying to get in any last breaths she could.

"It's...okay..." the dying kitten said quietly, but loud enough for the others to hear. Chase knew well enough that they were the last

words the kit would speak.

"Mousekit, no!" Smokekit shouted. He began shaking his sister with his white and black paws. Chase held back tears as he did so, knowing that the kit was dead. Mousekit made no movements or noise in response. Chase realized she truly was gone.

"Put her on my back. We'll bring her back to camp," the brown tabby said softly.

Chase was about to offer to do it herself, but she realized it probably wouldn't paint a great picture of her if she showed up to the clan's camp with a dead kit on her back and bloody paws.

"I'm so sorry," Chase murmured to the two kits. *"I would've gotten herbs, but it was already too late."*

They both nodded, muttering quiet thank-you's before Chase realized her stay had been long enough. She dipped her head and exited the bushes, trying to keep it together. Why? Why had she failed again?

Chase had to remind herself that the other two kits would have surely met the same fate if she had not stepped in, but she wished she had been able to save all three.

More questions began spinning through her head. Why had that unknown tom even been in the territory attacking kits? He must have been from another clan. Chase knew that there was not often violence between cats of the same clan.

Still...what kind of clan would attack kits like that and resort to such unnecessary violence?

A shiver went up Chase's spine. She had an idea of mind of where the source of violence might have come from, but she did not want to consider the idea too closely just yet.

I think...I think I need to remain on the outskirts of this forest for a while, Chase thought, feeling just as mentally unwell and heartbroken as when she had left the forest after Yew's death.

It hurt her to walk back in the direction of where she had come from. She thought she had been prepared to tackle the issues of cats again, but it appeared she needed some more time to herself. For the time being, she would keep her distance from the cats and probably any foxes in the area, until she felt ready once more to take up her mission again.

Chapter 30

As always, Chase couldn't stay away for long. As winter continued, she remained confined to the den she had built on the outskirts of the clan territories, remembering the feeling of the sticky blood of Mousekit on her paws. Why did she always feel such guilt every time she interacted with a cat?

The boredom had soon taken over though. Even if Chase had formed a little home for herself, she had met no other foxes and was beginning to miss catching glimpses of the felines like she had often done in the old forest.

So Chase began sneaking into the forest again, trying to familiarize herself with the area and the territories. She knew FoxClan and recognized its scent well, but she soon learned the other clan occupying the forest was SnowClan, and that third, unknown clan whose scent smelled faintly like blood, she discovered, was MoonClan.

I've followed them too closely, Chase thought miserably.

After hearing of the origins of MoonClan, Chase realized her premonitions had been true. Moonstar had followed the cats here, and judging by how the other cats spoke to each other on patrols, it seemed a life-threatening battle was imminent.

Chase was at a loss of what to think when she heard this news. Moonstar was now the leader of a vicious clan, one that wanted to rid the forest of FoxClan and SnowClan altogether and rule for its own. To think that tiny, insecure kitten that Chase had once befriended was behind it all...

She learned that MoonClan cats often liked to cross into other clan territories, which was why Mousekit had suffered that fate that day. A MoonClan tom had unjustly entered their territory and slaughtered the kits for the pure sport of it.

But what do I do? How do I stop this violence? Chase thought miserably. She was desperately going back and forth between spending a few days isolated in her den and then going back out to the clans to learn more. She wanted to find MoonClan herself and speak to Moonstar personally, but Chase knew that if she stepped foot, Moonstar herself, or some of the warriors, would surely slice her up in a matter of moments. Though Chase had scared that tom off from the kits, she knew it would be unlikely she'd be able to fight off an army of MoonClan cats.

Though Chase desperately wanted to intervene in an attempt to save her once-beloved friend, she thought of what Yew would inform her to do, and she knew him well enough to know that he would want her to keep her place. It was one thing to wish for a peaceful alliance between the foxes and cats, but it was probably not wise of Chase to involve herself in a deadly cat conflict.

So Chase decided to wait around and see what happened until it grew to the height of winter. There was one morning she stepped outside her den to find no snow falling as it so often did in the morning. The forest seemed deathly quiet with barely a clump of snow falling from a branch or a deer passing through the woods. Yet the smell of blood lingered through the air, and Chase realized suddenly that the battle between the clans must have come after all.

A part of her yearned to run toward the battle. Perhaps she could aid the cats against Moonstar or tell Moonstar to stop her foolishness, but what did Moonstar care? That evil she-cat had probably forgotten all about Chase up to this moment. Clearly Moonstar had always had a lot more on her mind than her friendship with Chase. Bloodlust and vengeance sure seemed to overpower their relationship.

Chase kept her distance from the forest for a few days after that eerily silent morning. The scent of blood no longer lingered through the air, not even by that evening, but Chase felt it better to remain away until the results of the battle had settled.

One morning, the sun was casting brilliant light onto the snow. Having the heat of the sun on Chase's fur made her feel safe and

comforted, and she finally felt ready to venture deeper into the woods again to find out what had transpired a few days before. She was relieved to still smell the scent of FoxClan and SnowClan and that the weird foreign scent of MoonClan was gone.

But if MoonClan's gone, what does that mean for Moonstar? Chase wondered.

Just as she had done as a young kit, she perched herself on a rock, trying to remain hidden in the brush since her auburn pelt stuck out greatly against the snow. She had pitted herself by FoxClan territory for a reason, hoping, hoping desperately, that perhaps Moonstar had had a change of heart as the forest seemed much more at peace than when she had first entered.

Peering through the brushes, Chase noticed a FoxClan patrol strolling by and peeked her ears up to listen. A ginger tom was leading a group of cats through the forest. It was impossible for them not to talk about the battle, Chase supposed, since it had only occurred a few days earlier.

"How much longer will we have to keep up these patrols, Foxeye?" a nearby gray tabby asked.

"Sunstar thinks until the end of the week. There have been no traces of MoonClan since the battle's end, but Sunstar still wants us to patrol for a little while. Soon enough, we'll join SnowClan to wander up toward the camp to truly confirm they're gone," the tom, Foxeye, answered. He had an air of authority that made Chase assume he was the deputy of the clan.

"Serves them right," a black she-cat murmured. *"It's satisfying to see their clan fall apart after Moonstar's death, isn't it? Especially after all the pain they inflicted on us."*

"Yes, it is a tragedy that we lost so many cats, though MoonClan lost their fair share too. We're just lucky both leaders were able to remain safe, though I fear Icestar will be down to her last life soon. Thankfully Sunstar still has some life in her. MoonClan wasn't prepared to deal with a change in authority after Moonstar was killed," Foxeye stated.

Chase dug her claws into the rock, shocked to hear that Moonstar had perished after all.

"Well, she only had one life anyway," a brown tabby she-cat noted. *"It wasn't like StarClan was actually going to grant her nine lives, and the Dark Forest surely doesn't have that power. She may have acted fearless, but that she-cat was always closer to death than the rest of us."*

Chase let out a whimper that caught the cats' attention. They all paused and pricked their ears in the direction of where Chase was.

"A MoonClan cat?" the gray tabby wondered.

"I don't think so. I can't pick up the scent," Foxeye said.

Chase fled quickly before they could investigate. She made it to a nearby stream before she hung her head and broke down in tears. Why should she be upset at Moonstar's death? The she-cat had been vicious, probably since the moment Chase had met her. Yet Chase still felt she had owed Moonstar more, that she could have changed her.

So many cats I wasn't able to save, Chase lamented.

More eavesdropping revealed that while the battle had lasted most of the day, it had come to its end when a mere SnowClan apprentice had killed Moonstar, *on accident.* The apprentice had pushed her off a rock in a mode of self-defense, and Moonstar had slammed her head and neck in the process, dying almost instantly. With no leader and no real motives, MoonClan had broken apart, and the remaining clan members had gone off into separate directions to live as rogues and so forth.

It took Chase a bit of time to come to the reality that Moonstar's reign was over. She kept having dreams of coming to the kit's aid, of meeting her up in the old FoxClan forest just as she had done when she was younger. When she could bear the pain no longer, Chase realized it was time to start on her mission again. Moonstar was gone, and the forest was at peace. It was a better time than ever to move forward with her original plan. Yew would have thought so too.

Starting tomorrow, it's back to investigating the forest and watching the cats, Chase thought. She was apprehensive about gaining the cats' trust, especially since her friendship with Moonstar had not gone as planned, but perhaps she would finally be able to find the right cat this time, and if she was lucky, she might meet a few helpful foxes on the way.

Tomorrow, I start my life anew, Chase decided.

Chapter 31

Chase was finally beginning to feel comfortable in the forest again. It had taken a bit to get over the loss of Moonstar, but she had realized deep down that it was what was best. She had no power to change the past. She could only prevent another situation from occurring in the future.

Chase still stayed in her small den outside the cats' territories though. She was still getting used to the borders and wasn't sure which places were safe yet for her to call her home. So in the meantime, she patrolled the area, trying her best to get glimpses of cats while also scouting for a new potential home, and possibly any foxes. She knew there had to be some foxes nearby. She caught a stale scent every now and again. But she never managed to get a glimpse of that familiar auburn pelt.

The sun was thankfully out in the morning, bringing some warmth to an otherwise cold winter day. Chase was hiding in the bushes, keeping an eye on a SnowClan patrol that was going by. She was on the edge of the border, watching as the group of cats patrolled the area. They had not caught a whiff of her scent yet, but she remained ready to run if their noses did catch her scent.

They looked happy, Chase thought. No longer tormented by Moonstar's reign, they seemed to be enjoying their life in the clans. Prey was still scarce in the season of winter, and Chase heard murmurs of cats becoming sick from an obscure illness, but it seemed like an ordeal that most wild animals had to deal with.

Chase watched them go and let her shoulders sink with a sigh. She did not know when or if she could ever gather the courage again to speak to one of them. She had saved those young kits, but she doubted she'd be able to find them again. And besides, what power did a kit have in convincing its clan that not all foxes were that bad?

Chase's thoughts were rolling around in her head when she heard a

twig crack behind her and a confused voice ask, "Why do you watch the cats like that?"

Chase spun around, finding a young male fox, probably just around her age, staring at her in utter confusion. She was surprised and stood up straight. A few bush twigs snapped, causing leaves and twigs to become trapped in her fur. She gave a weak smile and tried to brush them off, though a few still remained despite her best efforts to look clean.

"I wouldn't try to eat the cats for dinner. They're not worth the fight, and I've heard they don't really taste that good," the tod said.

"I wasn't trying to eat them!" Chase argued. "I...I watch them."

"Watch them? Why? To protect your home?" he wondered. "They're troublesome, but they don't really bother you if you stay out of their border. You're ridiculously close to it by the way."

"I know, I know. I know this forest well," Chase said.

"I wonder why I haven't seen you around then," the tod thought. "I know most foxes in the area, but either you're tucked far away, or you're new here."

"I only got here a little while ago," Chase admitted, still trying to get a few leaves off her pelt.

"Here, allow me," the tod offered, using his teeth to remove a dead leaf on her side that she could not reach.

"Thanks," Chase said, licking her fur clean.

"In all honesty, I picked up your scent here a while ago. It smelled foreign, so I kept coming back to investigate. Looks like I finally found you," he said.

"Yes, you are the master detective," Chase grumbled.

"I'm Rock, by the way. And you are?"

"Chase," she stated.

"Chase?" Rock asked, tilting his head. "That's an odd name."

"If you heard some of the clan cat names, you'd think it was less strange," Chase told him, laughing a bit. It was odd being in the presence of a fox again, but also comforting. It always took more work to converse with cats. Besides, as much as she hated to admit it, she'd been a bit lonely since Yew's death.

"How do you know what their names are?" Rock wondered.

"I-I can speak and understand cat," Chase admitted, not sure if it was wise to disclose this or not. Rock seemed nice enough, but he also seemed to embody the same virtues as any other fox that a cat was big trouble.

Rock's eyes widened. "How?! Were you raised by them or something?"

Chase laughed. "No, silly. I grew up with foxes. Where I came from, there were also clan cats. I met a fox...a few actually...that were acquainted with their tongue. They taught me. I thought it might..." She let her voice drift off. This wasn't Yew she was talking to. She didn't want to disclose her hopes and wishes to this strange tod. To avoid making enemies, it was best she said nothing further.

"You thought it might what?" Rock wondered.

Chase shook her head. "Nevermind. But I have conversed with a few cats in my lifetime. That's about all it's done."

"Well, maybe you can tell them to stop coming into our territory and stealing the prey," Rock teased.

Chase was quiet, and Rock tensed, clearly realizing what he had said had created some tension. He looked around a few moments and cleared his throat.

"So where are you living now?" Rock asked.

"Just at the boundary of the forest," Chase admitted as she shuffled her dark paws in the snow. "I've been trying to move out of that area, but I'm still not that acquainted with the territory here. In

fact, you're the first fox I've met since coming here."

"Really?" Rock asked, seeming surprised.

"Well, I wasn't looking that hard," Chase admitted.

"There are a lot of foxes living in this area, you know," Rock told her. "Why don't you come back with me to meet them?"

"Your family?" Chase asked. "I shouldn't. I don't really know if I'm welcome here. I'm a foreigner after all. At home, we never really liked other foxes showing up unannounced."

"Nonsense! That's not what happens in this forest," Rock promised. "You were wondering where all the foxes are, where they live, and I'll show it to you. Follow me."

Rock began walking, but Chase stood still a few moments. She wasn't so sure if she was ready to face a crowd of foxes again. She had to remind herself that this was not her family, that maybe there was another fox like her in the mix Rock presented. Taking in a deep breath, Chase gave a little hop and followed Rock deeper into the woods than she had ever ventured before.

Chapter 32

"Where exactly are you taking me? Your den?" Chase asked as she followed Rock through the quiet, winter woods. They were still trailing on the boundaries of the clan cats and not distancing themselves as much as Chase thought. Did the foxes and cats really live this close together in this forest?

"Yes, but also, not exactly," Rock stated. They came to a thick line of brush that seemed to separate SnowClan's borders from theirs. Rock ducked through a hole in one of the bushes, and Chase hesitantly followed behind.

As she passed through the dark, shaded bushes, she squinted as she came out into the light. There were less trees, here she realized, as her vision slowly returned. What she saw sprawled out in front of her made her jaw drop.

There were dens spread out across the clearing on both sides. Foxes wandering around and chatting with each other. Young foxes wrestled and nipped at their mother's ears as she sat out in the sun. It looked like a paradise made specifically for foxes.

"Pretty neat, huh?" Rock said as he noticed Chase's expression.

"This is..." She wasn't sure what to say. Incredible? Unbelievable? They were living just like clan cats, Chase realized. They weren't confined to small dens in random parts of the forest, but they all lived together, just as the cats did.

"I don't understand," Chase finally said at last. "Foxes aren't meant to live this way, or at least in my forest. We all have familial dens spread throughout the forest."

"We used to live like that too," Rock stated. "My parents lived that way, but as the humans closed in on the forest and the cats moved in, we became confined to this one area. Our territory is shrinking, so we made up for that by all living together. It's a lot friendlier this

way and a lot less foxes go hungry. Less are killed or get sick when we work together."

"You...you live like clan cats," Chase stated.

"Huh?" Rock asked.

"Clan cats...they live like this too. They had some abandoned territory in my old name. We...I...explored it one day. They live sort of like this, all communal-like. I never thought I'd see foxes do the same. It makes me happy. We're not so different after all," she realized.

Rock glanced at her oddly. "We didn't take direct inspiration, if that's what you're thinking. Maybe we live similarly, but the cats didn't teach us anything. It just so happened that this was the best way for us to live. You have a strange fascination with cats, you know. Don't you think they're a bit of a hassle?"

Chase laughed and began wandering around, admiring the set-up of Rock's home. "I suppose they can be a hassle, but...I don't think they're all that way," she murmured quietly.

Rock looked at her oddly for a second, but then he smiled, as if he almost admired this odd side of Chase. She supposed he had never met a fox quite like her before. Few foxes would ever dare have a soft side for their supposed enemies.

"We have many familial dens lined along here," Rock said, pointing his bushy tail toward the different directions of his home. "There aren't many kits around, obviously, since the mating season is approaching soon. There will be a lot more once it's spring, and then the males will leave for the annual hunt."

Chase paused. "The what?"

"The annual hunt," Rock said. "It's a tradition in this forest."

"I've never heard of anything like that," Chase stated. Copper had always been present in her and her siblings' lives since they were young. He had never gone away like Rock was proposing.

"It's not very traditional in the fox sense, just like our home," Rock explained. "The males go on a big hunt with each other in the spring around the time that the kits are being born. Some of the older females or the ones without mates hunt for the mothers, and the males then come back in the early summer. They usually bring some prey with them for the females to enjoy. It's a good way to keep our community bonded."

"All of the males go?" Chase asked, simply shocked.

"Most, but some of the older ones don't. They hunt here in the meantime. It balances out the prey in this forest, since we lose a lot to the cats. You look horrified by the concept, but it's not that big of a deal. The males look forward to going every year."

"Have you been?" Chase wondered.

"Once, last year. This upcoming year will be my second," Rock stated.

Oh. He's the same age as Yew, Chase thought.

"You must worry your mate then," Chase stated. She knew that if Yew had been alive and they had lived here, she would worry about him every day.

"Oh, I don't have a mate," Rock admitted. "It makes it easier to go, I guess. No mate or kits to worry about."

"Do you think you'll ever have one?" Chase wondered.

Rock shrugged. "Maybe, if the time is right. My parents sure want me to have one, but I don't see the rush. There are many foxes here, but you've grown up with all of them, you know? There's never any new faces. I've known many of the foxes here since I was younger."

"Oh," Chase murmured.

"What about you?" Rock asked. "Do you have a mate? I don't want to keep you if he's waiting for you back in your den."

"Oh...no," Chase admitted. She opened her mouth, ready to bring up

Yew's unfortunate death, but she suddenly decided against it. She didn't need to be pitied by Rock or any of these foxes. "I'm quite young," Chase said in response. "I haven't had a mate yet."

"Wow. You were just born in the spring, then? You appear a lot more mature," Rock stated. "But if you're so young, why did you leave home? On your own, nonetheless?"

"It wasn't working out for me where I lived," Chase admitted. "I wanted to go somewhere new."

"Why did you choose here?" Rock wondered.

"Intuition, I guess. You all seem to have a lovely life here. I never had that back where I lived," Chase said as she watched the foxes happily interact with each other. There seemed to be no tensions altogether.

"It is nice, huh?" Rock replied. "Let me show you around, introduce you to my own parents."

"Oh, you don't have to--"

Rock was already leading the way. Chase followed meekly behind, noticing the stares of foxes as they realized a new vixen had entered their home. She gave weak smiles when she could and did her best to stay friendly as Rock paraded her around and introduced her. She was afraid he might mention that she spoke cat, as an icebreaker of sorts, but he merely introduced her as a foreigner who had come for a new life in the forest.

Rock's den was near the end of the line. He strode into his den triumphantly with his fluffy white chest boasted out.

"Mom, Dad. There's someone I'd like you to meet," he said. Chase quietly entered the den, greeting two older looking foxes. They seemed much older than her own parents, and Chase suddenly wondered if Rock and his siblings had been their last litter.

"I always thought you'd get a mate someday, but I didn't suppose you'd pick her out from somewhere else in the forest," Rock's father stated.

"We're not mates!" both Chase and Rock stated in unison, trying to make that point clear as quickly as possible.

"Sorry for the intrusion," Chase said. "My name is Chase, and I just arrived to this forest recently. I hadn't met any other foxes until I came across Rock in the forest today. He was just showing me his home."

"Where do you live then, if not here?" Rock's mother asked.

"Farther away, on the edge of the woods. It's a bit of a trek from here, but it's home, I guess," Chase stated.

"Well, why don't you just live here, then?" Rock's father suggested. "It's easy to build a new den, or if you're lonely, you can join some of the other vixens in one of their dens."

"Oh, I...With all due respect, I've just met all of you. I'd feel bad suddenly living here. In fact, I better head home soon. I want to get back before dark, and the sun sets so early these days," Chase said, taking her leave.

"Chase, wait!" Rock called, following behind her.

"Thanks for showing me around. Maybe we'll cross paths again soon," Chase said, giving him a light smile.

"Don't you want to stay? My mother is right. It'll be easy for you to make a home here," Rock stated. "Besides, it can't be fun living out there alone, especially at this time of year. You'll have more prey here."

"I can hunt fine on my own," Chase promised him as she began walking once more.

"I didn't mean that as an insult!" Rock exclaimed as he caught up to her again. "What I mean is that all foxes are welcome here, even those from a different forest. Sure, many have lived here since they were born, but we always accept new foxes that come our way. I think you'd really like it here."

"I don't know. This is all new to me," Chase admitted. "I've never

really lived on my own before and--"

"This is a weird way for a fox to live, I know, but I think it's perfect for someone starting out their life like you. You strike me as an odd fox--not in a bad way--but in an interesting, kind of alluring way. So...why not live in an odd place?" Rock suggested.

Chase could tell he wanted her to stay. It was hard to say no when he was staring at her with somber eyes. She hoped he hadn't grown to like her in the short time they'd spoken. She was not looking for any romance.

But Rock was right. It was difficult living on the edge of the woods all alone like that. Here was a chance for her to meet some more foxes, more than had ever been in her family, and start her life anew. And if she counted Rock, then she already had one friend.

Chase let out a sigh and dipped her head. "All right. I suppose I can let a badger or some lone cat take over my den, then."

"That's the spirit! I'm sure you'll like it here!" Rock said, leading her back in the way she'd come. "But, of course, you can always go back, I mean. You don't have to stay here."

"I'll give it a shot," Chase agreed.

It's closer to the clan cats. I can keep an eye on them even more often, she thought.

Chase's stomach let out a loud rumble, and she realized suddenly she had not eaten anything all day.

"Say, do you have food around here? I'm starving!"

"Right this way," Rock said happily, leading her farther into her new home.

Chapter 33

It was strange living with foxes again, Chase thought, or with a group of them anyway. She had felt so confined when she was just a young kit living with her family. Yew had been a way to break her free of that bind, but their time together had been so short, sending Chase back into solitude again.

Chase always thought she would never get along with any other foxes besides Yew, but she was beginning to enjoy her time in her new home. She had a small, comfy den to herself and could talk with who she pleased, though most of the time that was Rock, since she didn't know many of the other foxes just yet.

When she did manage to speak with the other foxes though, they were generally kind to her, asking where she had lived before, giving her tips about where the best hunting spots were, and doing their best to make Chase feel welcome. It threw Chase off a little bit, thinking that she could be happy just like this, without thinking of the cats at all.

Of course, the clan cats still crossed her mind, and she knew their territory was close by, but she had not dared to venture too close, afraid of how the other foxes would judge her. Since she was younger, Chase hadn't cared much for what other foxes thought of her, but since she had just joined this new home, she was worried about trying to fit in with the others.

Still, Chase wasn't sure if she could live like this--as just a fox--forever. She wanted to get back out, closer to the cats, and see if she truly could complete Yew's mission, but to do that first, she needed to know more about them.

Rock had invited Chase on a nearby hunting trip one morning. They were having trouble finding much of anything in the winter cold, which left a large space of time for conversation.

"Is prey this scarce?" Chase asked, feeling her stomach rumble.

"It depends. Some days are better than others," Rock admitted. He glanced up. "Ah, it's snowing again."

"So...Rock," Chase said, as she padded behind him.

"What is it?" he asked

"The clan cats...how long have they been here?" Chase wondered.

"Not too long. We've had other cats pass by, but nothing like the clan cats. They came here in the transitioning period between autumn and winter. We tried to fight back, but their numbers are larger than you'd expect, and some of the foxes suffered some bad wounds. So the territory ended up being shrunken a bit more. We still venture into their territory a little bit every now and again, just to see if we can snag a bite," Rock stated.

"I'm sorry about the territory," Chase murmured. "We had clan cats too where I used to live." She failed to mention that they were the exact same cats and that she knew the true reasoning behind the cats' settlement in these woods. She was afraid Rock would think she was mad if she said too much.

"It's the nature of the forest. There are several predators, and we're all at odds with each other trying to get prey. I'm not going to pretend they're not a nuisance. Our life was easier before they came, but the humans haven't been helping either. It's a struggle for survival out here," Rock said.

"Don't you...don't you think the cats are trying to survive too?" Chase asked.

"Yes, but I don't think they needed to take as much territory as they did. If they had respect for the other predators around here, they would've left some prey for us," Rock murmured.

What he was spewing were the same sentiments of Chase's father, Copper, but they were also different somehow. Copper seemed to have an undying hatred for the cats simply for just being their breed, but Rock was more eloquent in his reasoning for why the cats bothered him. They were all struggling to survive, and in a

time where their forest space was shrinking, it was important they all ate.

Surprisingly, Chase almost agreed with him. She had no hatred toward the cats like so many other foxes she knew, but she knew there was a better way for them to live together.

"Rock, what if we..." Chase's voice drawled off. She suddenly lost her courage. Maybe this wasn't the time or place to bring up her cooperation plan between the two predators.

He turned his head. "What is it?"

"Well, what if we learned to cooperate?" Chase asked.

"The cats and the foxes? You can't be serious. I'm not sure that's possible, Chase," Rock stated. He was calm in saying it though, not screaming in a way Chase would have expected her father to react.

"But I can speak cat. Maybe I can speak to them--"

"Without getting your face clawed off? I'm not so sure," Rock stated.

"Don't you think it would be easier if we all got along though?" Chase asked.

"Yes, but...it's unrealistic. It's unheard of. Two predators getting along. We may have the same goal in mind, but when it comes down to it, we're competitors for the same food," Rock stated. He crouched, having spotted something. "And today, it looks like I've got something the cats haven't."

Chase opened her mouth, wanting to continue their conversation, but Rock had already leapt into the air, and when he emerged, there was a squirming rabbit in his jaws, which he turned limp with a single bite.

Chase was not angry with Rock's responses. She supposed she had always been a bit of an optimist, but there was part of her that just wanted one more fox to act like her. Now that she was speaking more with Rock and living with new foxes, she wondered if Yew

would be the only other fox who felt the same as her.

Chase glanced down at her paws, trying to hold back the tears welling in her eyes as she realized how painfully she missed Yew. Her life would have been so much different if he had survived. They could have come to his forest, met these foxes, and truly changed the forest for the better.

"Chase, are you all right?" Rock asked, looking genuinely concerned.

But then my relationship with Rock and the other foxes would have been different, Chase realized. *I may not have tried to form meaningful connections with Yew already by my side.*

"I'm sorry. I'm just a bit hungry," Chase stated.

Rock chuckled slightly. "I understand. I get cranky when I'm hungry too, but here's a fresh rabbit we can share."

Chase nodded and sat down next to him in the snow. Their coats were beginning to turn white as the snowflakes continued coming down, but Chase didn't mind much. She was happy to have a meal, and to share it with someone for once. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until she was gulping down bite by bite. Rock was barely able to keep up with her voracious appetite.

We're all struggling to survive, Chase realized as she disappointedly finished her half of the rabbit.

"You can have the rest if you want," Rock asked, who was still nibbling.

"I couldn't. You caught it," Chase argued.

"I can tell you're hungrier than me. Just have it."

Chase felt bad, but the meat looked too delicious to resist, so she continued eating away, thankful for Rock's kindness. She felt a million times better as they left the decaying bones of the rabbit behind to head back to their dens.

Chapter 34

Dare Chase say it, but she was feeling content living in new home among the foxes. Every fox was so friendly and treated her with more respect than she felt her family ever had.

When Chase had first left home, she had wondered if it had been wise to do so. She had felt so lonely before she had met Rock and the others. But now, she was beginning to feel at peace again. She could see herself living here for a while. Those early thoughts of returning home when she had first arrived were long gone.

Chase awoke early one morning, watching the sun begin to shine over the snowy hills. The days were getting a little warmer, but she knew that spring was still a little farther off. She couldn't wait for the day when the snow melted, however. She was getting tired of her cold paws.

"Morning, Chase," Rock greeted her. He was exiting his den at the same time. His was across from hers, so they had a direct view into each other's dens.

"Good morning," she said, smiling at him. She was still getting to know some of the other foxes, but most of her time she spent with Rock. He was the most knowledgeable about the forest anyway and happy to show her around. Plus, he was a better hunter than she expected. He somehow always managed to find at least one piece of prey during the cold, winter day.

"Hungry?" Rock asked.

Chase nodded.

"Why don't we go hunting together?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied before following him deeper into the woods. Her eyes lingered to where the SnowClan border lay in the distance. Her

visits had been getting briefer and briefer.

At first, she had strayed from watching the cats because of the possible embarrassment she might face if Rock or one of the other foxes caught her, but then, she realized that she sometimes felt more content staying away. Every time Chase did see a cat, she was reminded of its beauty, sure, but she was also reminded of Moonstar's bloodstained paws, that kit her father had made them kill, the scream of her sister Rush, dying from a cat attack, and so forth.

"Everything okay?" Rock asked, noticing Chase deep in thought.

"Oh, yes. I'm fine," Chase promised him, continuing her walk in the woods. Her eyes suddenly locked on a rabbit with sleek white fur nibbling on some leaves. Chase crouched down behind some foliage and slowly approached. She hated how her pelt made her stick out in the winter, but thankfully, the brown bushes were keeping her cover for now. Still, she had to be careful of how she walked since the snow made more sound than the normal forest soil.

Chase sprang right as the rabbit turned its head. Chase's jaws wrapped around its neck in an instant, and the piece of prey suddenly hung limp. She dropped it at Rock's feet and smiled.

"Your hunting is getting better," he noticed as they began to share the prey.

"It was always good!" she yelled at him.

Rock chuckled. "I mean in this forest, anyway. And in the winter. This is your first winter, isn't it?"

Chase nodded. She had always imagined her first winter to be watching the snowflakes with Yew and staying warm in his burrow, but looking at Rock, she realized times had changed.

"Besides the hunting, are you liking your new home as well?" Rock asked.

Chase nodded.

"That's good. I was a little worried at first, you know?"

Chase tilted her head. "Why?"

Rock chuckled. "Well, you didn't seem good with other foxes, to be honest. You were always on your own, living outside the forest, and then you told me you talked to cats. I thought maybe you had been living with cats when you said that, but it seemed a bit ridiculous."

"Don't be silly. That wouldn't be possible," Chase murmured. Perhaps when she was younger she might have thought so, but the goal had never been for the cats and foxes to share the same den space. It had just been for them to hunt together in harmony.

"Imagine if a cat lived with us. I think that'd be crazy," Rock thought, laughing to himself.

"You mean you wouldn't kill it?" Chase asked.

"Oh, I was just speaking hypothetically. If a cat were to enter our territory, we would need to drive it off back into its own. I can't imagine any circumstance a cat might live with us," Rock explained.

"Oh, of course," Chase murmured. "I do like it a lot here though," she said. "I'm not just some loner fox, you know."

"You left your family though, didn't you?" Rock asked. "Why?"

Chase glanced down at her paws. The only reason she had left had been because of Yew's death, but she didn't feel comfortable sharing that with Rock. In fact, she had not mentioned the fact she used to have a mate to any fox around here. It would seem strange anyway, her being so young.

"My family and I didn't get along," Chase explained. "It was difficult living with them, so when I got old enough, I left."

"I mean, my parents and siblings used to fight with me too, but I never left over it," Rock admitted.

"This was different. Some of them were really monsters," Chase thought, thinking of her father specifically.

Rock cleared his throat. "Sorry to bring the mood down. I won't ask again."

"No, it's okay. Frankly, you're the only fox who seems to care I was out here alone. I don't know what I'd do if you hadn't found me," Chase said, smiling at him. "It was getting lonely living on my own."

"I'm glad," Rock said. "I was kind of hoping you'd join once I introduced you to everyone. I'd been tracking your scent for a while, which sounds kind of strange, sorry, but I've never met any fox outside my own home, so it was nice to meet one from far away."

Chase blinked in disbelief. Rock had turned his face away in embarrassment after admitting such a thing.

"Should we head back then?" Rock asked.

Chase nodded.

They walked along the thin line separating their border from SnowClan's. Chase peeked for a moment, wanting to see if any cats were nearby, but she saw nothing. She briefly considered coming back and visiting later, but she quickly tossed that thought away. For some reason, she didn't desire to come back and watch the border anytime soon.

Will Yew be upset with me for thinking this? Chase thought as she turned back toward her home with Rock.

Times were changing. Chase was beginning to understand the delicate balance of predator and prey in the forest these days. She still admired cats. She still thought there was a lot to learn about them, but she no longer felt an allegiance to the plan she had with Yew.

Right now, she thought that, maybe, she could give being a normal fox a chance for once.

Chapter 35

As the cold days of winter continued on, Chase awaited anxiously for the springtime. She was getting tired of dragging her feet through the snow all the time and struggling to find prey. Not to mention, mating season had arrived, and she could not stand to hear the romantic gossip from the foxes she lived with. She wished it could just be spring already.

Though Chase had made her fair share of friends, she was keeping toward Rock mostly during this time, as he was the only one who still seemed sane. Plus, she enjoyed talking with him, and they had been bonded since she'd first arrived. Not to mention, he was always usually able to find at least one piece of prey when they went hunting together.

Chase woke up one morning, happy to see the sun out and not a cloud in sight. That meant the snow might melt a bit, and there would be no more snow coming that day. She was slated to go on another morning hunting trip with Rock. Now that spring was approaching, she kept remembering that he would be leaving on the annual hunt soon, and she'd be alone again.

Maybe I should try talking to even more foxes, Chase thought when she realized how lonely she'd probably be when he was gone.

Before she could make it to Rock's den, however, there was a group of giggling and gossiping vixens who eyed her as she approached. She stared at them oddly, offering a, "Good morning" in return to their strange stares.

"Chase, psst," one of the vixens, Peach, said, ushering her forward with the slight movement of her head.

"What is it?" Chase wondered.

There was some more giggling as she grew closer.

"We heard that you and Rock are mates," Peach said.

Chase tilted her head. "Which fox started that rumor? We're just friends, that's all," Chase argued, slightly irritated that the foxes were going around spreading rumors about her and Rock's relationship. She was starting to prefer her solo den on the outskirts of the forest suddenly.

"Whatever you say," Peach said before leading her cult of vixens away.

Chase wondered where the rumor had come from. Was Rock planning to ask her to be his mate? She hadn't considered it before, but nothing romantic had ever transpired between them. Besides, she was still getting over Yew, wasn't she? That being said, she was thinking about her deceased mate less and less since she had stopped visiting the clan cats so much. Had that been the only reason she was tied to him? It made her wonder how their relationship would have turned out if he'd lived longer.

Chase met Rock by his den, still a bit perturbed by the rumor she had been told. She mostly kept her silence as she hunted with him, giving vague answers here and there to the questions he asked. He could clearly tell that something was up because he finally asked, "What's wrong?"

Chase sighed. "Oh, it's dumb. I heard some vixens today gossiping about we were mates, which is crazy, right?" she asked, laughing slightly.

Rock laughed nervously too. "Yeah, crazy."

"I mean, just because we hunt together often doesn't mean we like each other that way," Chase added.

"Yeah, totally," Rock stated.

"Just a dumb rumor," Chase muttered as she began hunting with him again. The rest of the hunting trip felt odd, however, with little words exchanged between the two of them. All Chase could do was stop and stare at Rock as she thought about that dumb rumor. She

realized his pelt was more fiery than she had previously thought, and his shoulders were more broad too. Now that she thought about it, he was a very handsome tod. She wondered why he had not picked a mate of his own yet.

"Are you planning to ask anyone to be your mate?" Chase wondered.

Rock jolted slightly. "No. You know me. My parents are displeased that I haven't found one yet. Have to keep the streak up so I can keep disappointing them. Why are you asking?"

"Just wondering, that's all," Chase said as she continued walking.

"Why? Are *you* going to ask a fox to become your mate?" Rock asked.

"No! I've been complaining about mating season the entire time!" Chase exclaimed.

"Right, right," Rock murmured.

They parted their ways in the afternoon, leaving Chase feeling strange and confused. The rumor rubbed her the wrong way in more ways than one. She hated it for existing, but also, she wondered if she envied the rumor too.

Oh no, she realized with a startle as she lifted her head from her paws. *I think I'm starting to catch feelings for Rock.*

First she tried to convince herself that it was just the atmosphere. Everyone was in a romantic mood, and maybe that's why Chase felt compelled to act the same way, but she'd always been fond of Rock, even before that. She never doubted that they were good friends, but now she was beginning to wonder if they could ever be something more.

She kept her distance from Rock a few days, sneaking glances every once in a while. Sometimes she'd catch his eyes staring at her, and she wondered if he liked her as well. She remembered him saying that he'd been tracking her when she'd first come to the woods, that he'd always desired to speak to her, but that had just been pure

curiosity, right? There couldn't be actual feelings driving those motions.

But why would I even like Rock? Chase thought. He was nothing like Yew at all. Yew had been soft, gentle, and he'd been supportive of Chase's plan to unite the foxes and cats. Rock was a charmer, but also kind of awkward. He was a good conversationalist, and a good friend. He didn't agree with Chase, but she'd listened to his discussion about the predators and prey and had found it to be a civilized discussion. There was no flaming rage behind his words like what had been behind her father's.

Chase could see herself with Rock. Unlike when she had been with Yew, she'd never had a clear image of the future, but she could see herself living with him in this community, raising kits together in the spring...

She cut off her thoughts. Since when had the idea of fox kits come up? She'd never thought herself ready to have any, at least not this year anyway.

One night, when the stars were shining brightly against the winter sky, Chase heard footsteps approaching her small den. She glanced up, noticing Rock coming toward hers.

"Sorry if it's late, but do you want to go on a walk?" he asked.

Chase nodded, feeling overjoyed to do so. She walked with him underneath the night sky, admiring the forest at nighttime. She had never gotten to explore the forest much in the dark, though she shivered when she thought of how Yew's death had been in the evening. This was different though. They were not close to the humans' residence here. They were snuggled close in the forest, with only other cats to worry about, she guessed.

"So I heard that same rumor too, today," Rock said. "My parents heard it and were congratulating me."

"Oh," Chase said.

"Yeah. I don't know who's starting the rumors," Rock complained.

"Do you want the rumors to stop?" Chase wondered.

"Yes, no, I don't know. It's not like they really can, right? Not as long as we keep hanging out together," Rock said.

"Right," Chase said, her heart sinking some. Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps Rock didn't feel the same way.

"Do you think..." Rock's voice faltered. "Ah, nevermind."

"What do I think?" Chase wondered.

"Do you think those rumors could ever come true someday? I mean, do you want them to come true? Oh--er--*gah*--I'm so bad at this!" Rock exclaimed.

Chase sat down and tilted her head, waiting patiently for him to begin speaking.

"I'm sorry, Chase. I like you a lot, and as more than friends. I've liked you since I first met you practically. And the intention wasn't ever to become mates with you. I've enjoyed just being friends with you, and I feel bad because I know you seem annoyed with all this romantic nonsense, so I'm sorry. But I do really like you. I pretty much love you, I think. I won't pursue my feelings or anything. I just still want to be friends. I'm sorry," Rock murmured.

Chase began giggling at him.

Rock's fur stood up. "Hey? What's with the laughing! I just confessed to you! In case you don't know, that took a lot of courage. I was pretty set on not having a mate anytime soon, so I would never have to go through that, so if you'd shut your mouth and stop laughing--"

"Calm down. You're so grumpy," Chase complained. "We're both really dumb, aren't we?"

"Both?"

"I realized recently I liked you a lot too. The rumors were partially bothering me because I almost wanted them to be true. So Rock, do

you want to be my mate?" Chase asked.

Rock blinked in disbelief. "Are you sure? You're not lying?"

Chase shook her head.

"Yeah, I would love to!" he exclaimed, bouncing up and down suddenly. "But you know, I was going to be super traditional and ask you myself."

"I'm not very traditional," Chase told him. "But I think you knew that already." She smiled as he approached her and hummed as he nuzzled against her. He took a seat right next to her so that their fur was touching, and together, they leaned against each other and glanced up at the winter stars.

Chapter 36

Chase watched a few yellow butterflies float over the newly-sprouted flowers that had grown in their fox community. The snow had since melted as spring had ushered in. The air was warm again, the prey was coming back, and Chase felt at ease.

Besides the fact her stomach was so swollen she felt about ready to pop if another fox just touched her with its paw.

"A freshly-caught squirrel for my beautiful mate!" Rock exclaimed in a sing-song-y voice as he dropped a dead squirrel at her feet. Rock had since moved into Chase's den. The spacious den felt a lot less lonely now that he was here with her.

"You try being heavily pregnant and see how you like it," Chase snapped at him as she took a bite.

Chase was one of the last vixens to give birth this season. She and Rock had become mates in late winter, and now that spring was already mid-way through, there were already dozens of small fox kits tumbling around. Chase supposed hers would be doing the same when they were born.

She glanced at Rock as she ate, giving him a slight smile. She knew he would be leaving shortly for the annual hunt, leaving her to care for the kits alone. She wasn't worried. There would be other vixens and some young and old foxes that would stay and help care for any overwhelmed mothers.

To be honest, Chase had not expected to have kits so soon, but at the moment, it just felt right. Still, she, and she was sure Rock, felt too immature to care for kits. It would be their first litter, and to be honest, Chase had no idea what to do. All she had as a guideline currently was to do the exact opposite parenting of what her parents had done.

Chase frequently worried about being the same cruel, overbearing

parent as her father was to her, even though she knew that was far too out of character for her. She couldn't ever see Rock doing something like that either. Still, Chase wanted to make sure her kits had the best possible life. She hoping she and Rock could stop each other from being too harsh on the kits once they were born.

Chase glanced ahead, watching foxes mingle about. In the past few months, she had helped transform the community into even more of a clan-like place. More specific dens for different fox ages, organized patrols and hunts. She'd even taught the other foxes some basic medicine for when the foxes got sick. She'd learned a bit herself from Claw and when she was traveling, but now she was starting to become a bit of a medicine expert around her.

Unfortunately, she'd had to take a break from all her work to care for her kits that were due to arrive at any moment now. She was hoping they would soon. Chase was getting tired of lugging around all the extra weight. She wanted to get back to hunting again. Not to mention, she had not gone to see the clan cats since she had discovered she was pregnant. The memory of her mother being attacked by the cats over a piece of prey stuck deep in her mind. She realized she could not do anything reckless now that she would have other foxes to care for.

It was later when the sun was descending behind the mountains that Chase began to feel the first waves of pain and knew her labor was beginning. She didn't wake Rock until the contractions got worse, and just as the stars began to shine, she gave birth to three kits of her own.

The other vixens were congratulating her after they had helped her to deliver while Rock scooted a leaf filled with fresh water toward her for her to drink from. She was tired and exhausted, never imagining how great the stress would have been to give birth. But once she smiled down at her three new kits, Chase's heart was filled with love. She could see the same love reflected in Rock's eyes when she stared up at him.

"Do you want to know what I first thought when I gave birth?" Chase asked after the other vixens had left and the kits began to suckle.

"What?" Rock asked.

"Thank goodness it's only three," Chase said, which caused him to laugh. Her litter was a bit smaller than normal, though that didn't bother her. It meant less little ones to manage.

Chase shuddered suddenly, thinking of Rush's death. She knew it was common for not all the kits to make it to adulthood. It seemed weird to imagine as she stared down at her three, perfectly healthy kits.

"What's wrong?" Rock asked, noticing her discomfort.

"One of my sisters passed away at a very young age. I just don't want the same happening to them," Chase said.

"They'll be fine," Rock said, licking her forehead. "You'll be a great mother, you'll see. In the meantime, why don't we name them?"

Chase nodded. She had given birth to one daughter and two sons. The vixen was a bit smaller than the tods, but she had had a lot of energy already. Chase hoped she'd have the same fierce spirit as her mother.

"How about we call the larger tod Fennel," Rock suggested.

Chase nodded, tilting her head as she thought of a name for his brother. "Heron?"

"Yeah. I like that a lot," Rock told her.

Chase stared down at her daughter. All throughout her pregnancy she had thought of names, but now she was at a blank all of the sudden. She thought for a few moments, then smiled as she thought of a name.

"Lily," she said. "We can call her Lily."

"I couldn't think of any better name," Rock told her. He settled down next to her and his new kits, staring at them eagerly.

"I'll go on a big hunt tomorrow and bring you all the food I can

find," Rock promised her. "It'll be a mini annual hunt, just for you."

Chase smiled, already fearing his absence. What if something happened? What if she was alone again, just as she had been with Yew, except this time, she had kits to care for?

Chase tried to keep the thoughts out of her mind. Right now, she needed to rest. Her kits were growing drowsy too as they curled up next to each other. She smiled at them one last time before resting her head on her paws and falling asleep, still in awe that she now had a little family of her own.

Chapter 37

The golden morning sun was gently drifting into Chase's den. Many of the foxes were still asleep, including Rock and Chase's own kits, but she had awoken early. Not wanting to get up just yet, she watched the sun rise over the horizon and felt Rock's pelt brush against hers as he breathed. She smiled as she listened to his quiet breathing, as well as their children's.

Her stomach grew queasy as she thought of the day ahead. Today the tods would be departing for their annual hunt while Chase would stay here and care for her kits with assistance from the other foxes who were staying, most of them vixens.

It was a shame Rock had to leave so soon. Their kits had not yet opened their eyes. She realized they would not see their father until he returned. If he returned...

Chase hated to think of it. She knew these hunts were generally safe, but no one could ever guarantee every fox would make it back. She had already lost Yew, and she wasn't so sure if she'd be ready to leave Rock as well, especially when they had just had kits.

Chase felt Rock slowly stir beside her. He glanced at her and smiled before standing up and stretching his limbs.

"Morning," he said, leaning down to lick her.

"Good morning," Chase replied quietly, not wanting to wake the kits with too much noise. "You better have a big breakfast."

"I'll bring us something to share," Rock promised.

He returned as the other foxes were stirring with a plump rabbit. Chase smiled and shared it with him. Her kits were beginning to wake and suckle, though every once in a while they would fuss and she'd have to give them a few good licks before returning to her

meal.

"When do you set off?" Chase asked him calmly. She didn't want to admit that she was terrified of having him go. She'd been encouraging and hadn't said much about his departure. After all, that was the norm around here. She almost wished it wasn't.

"When the sun is at its highest," Rock replied. "We'll be able to find a place to rest before it becomes too dark."

"I'm sure there will be a lot of tasty prey out there for you to eat," Chase assured him.

"Of course. I just wish I could share it with you," Rock said.

"The other vixens will take care of me. You told me yourself that they're good hunters. Your mother, I'm sure, will stop by to make sure I'm well taken care-of," Chase assured him, giving him a gentle smile.

"We won't be gone long. The kits will definitely be running around when I'm back though," Rock said, laughing some. "They'll be so big!"

Chase laughed a bit to yourself. "You're right. Hopefully they won't be too hard to handle. I'll tell them stories about you so they know exactly which fox is their father when you all return."

Rock chuckled. "Just tell them to look for the handsomest one," he teased.

Chase smiled, though she felt her heart break more and more with each word they exchanged. Still, they spent part of the day together and looked over their kits fondly before the tods began to gather. As Chase saw the foxes began to clump together, she looked at Rock with worry on her face.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine," he assured her.

Tears began to stream down Chase's muzzle before she could stop herself. She bent her head down, letting out small hisses of pain in an attempt to hold them back. She could feel Rock's stare of concern

burning into her, even as she tried to avoid eye contact.

"Chase, what's wrong?" he asked, sounding almost confused. She had tried so hard to act supportive of his small journey, but all that pent-up sadness and frustration had finally burst.

"I'll be okay, Chase," he promised her once more, licking her ear as she cried. "Will you please look at me?"

She sniffed and nodded, staring at him. His eyes were such a beautiful brown, she realized, unlike any color she had seen in a fox's eyes before.

"I know this is hard on you and the other vixens. I know this isn't what you were used to before. It will get better with time. I'll do my best to stay safe so that I can come home happy and healthy to you and our kits. I promise," Rock said.

Chase tried to smile through the pain, but it was hard to believe him. Yew had seemed healthy too, yet all it had taken was a small incident for Chase to have him ripped out of her life in an instant.

"Why didn't you tell me you were upset?" Rock asked.

Because then I'd have to tell you about Yew, Chase thought. She had thought about telling him once or twice, but part of it made her uncomfortable telling her current mate about her past one. Yew's death hurt less, but it was still a raw wound. During autumn, she would have imagined living in a den like this with new pups with him, not Rock. She couldn't tell Rock that she wasn't prepared to lose another loved one.

"I'm sorry. I should've said something," Chase murmured.

"Don't be. You'll take good care of the kits while I'm gone, though? I'll give them a good lecture if they give you trouble," Rock promised.

Chase laughed a bit through her tears. "Oh, they'll be fine. I can't wait to see your reaction to the great foxes they've become when you return."

Rock smiled and licked between her eyes before nuzzling her. "I love you, Chase. I'll be back before you know it."

Chase grinned. "I love you, too." She almost burst into tears though as he bent down to the kits sleeping by her belly and licked each of their foreheads.

"I love you, Lily. I love you, Fennel. I love you, Heron," Rock said to each one. She could tell by the hoarseness of his throat that he was getting a bit choked up as well. She imagined it was hard leaving the newest members of your family so young after they were born. Chase couldn't imagine the burden.

"Stay safe," Chase said as she watched him leave the den. She would walk him out to the edge of the forest like some of the other tods' mates were doing, but her pups were still far too young for her to leave them unsupervised.

So Chase sat and watched out the entrance of her den as she watched Rock slowly take off with the other foxes and vanish into the woods, with no traces left behind them.

Chapter 38

Just a heads up this book will be updated twice a month from now on, rather than weekly since I return to college at the end of the week.

"Ah, Fennel, Heron! Don't run out of the den so fast!" Chase called. She was still licking Lily's fur into place, but her rambunctious sons had already sped out of the den to play with some of the other fox kits.

"You're lucky that your brothers shortened your bath today," Chase teased Lily as she pushed her daughter forward with her nose.

Chase stepped outside into the light, squinting some as she got adjusted to the sun's summer brightness. Fennel and Heron were already wrestling with some other kits, and Lily bounded after them, ready to join in on the fun.

Chase was happy to see her kits growing already, but she missed Rock desperately. She wished he was getting to see the kits grow and play, but she knew he and the other tods were most likely having a successful hunt and were stuffing their bellies to the brim.

Life had been pretty peaceful since summer had arrived. Chase's kits and the other vixen's offspring had been growing rapidly. The dark brown fur of her kits was now transitioning into a bright auburn, like hers.

It was amazing to think that last summer, Chase would have never expected this outcome. Once meeting Yew, she had thought her future would be secured with him, but now she was happy with Rock. She was popular among the other foxes they lived with,

which was strange to think considering she'd always been a bit of an outcast.

Rock and our kits don't need to know about that time of my life, Chase thought as she watched them play. Yes, life was pretty simple these days, but she was okay with that.

Suddenly, two foxes stumbled out of the bushes in a panic, both carrying and supporting sickly looking foxes. One vixen held a limp kit by the scruff, while the sickly-looking adult vixen leaned against another for support.

"Chase, we need your help!" one of the foxes called.

Chase glanced toward her kits, noticing their stares. "Go back to the den," she told them sternly. The world of danger and death was still new to them, and while she knew she could not keep them from it forever, she wanted to do so as best as she could.

Her kits slowly slunk away from their playmates and retreated back to their den while Chase followed the foxes to a nearby den. The kit appeared comatose, though she could see the faintest rise and fall of his chest, while the vixen was shivering and twitching, as if she were fevered.

"What happened?" Chase asked.

"We don't know. Iris must have taken her kit out to play, but we found both of them like this when we went on a hunt," one of the healthy foxes, Blossom, informed her.

"Iris, are you able to answer questions?" Chase asked, waving her tail in front of the sickly vixen.

Iris nodded her head. She at least appeared a bit more conscious than her poor kit.

"M-Moss..." Iris managed to get out.

"Moss? What do you mean?" Chase asked. There was plenty of moss growing in the woods. How was that relevant?

"We found them near a strange-looking moss," Blossom's colleague, Cherry, informed Chase.

"What do you mean 'strange?'" Chase asked.

"It didn't look like it grew naturally in the forest," Blossom explained.

"You've never seen this moss before?" Chase asked them. All foxes, even Iris, shook their heads.

"My kit and I...touched it, sniffed it...then not too much later, we felt sick," Iris explained, shuddering once more.

"Where was the moss located?" Chase asked Iris.

"At the edge...by humans," Iris stated, coughing some more.

"The humans must have planted it, then. You all have never come across this type of poisonous moss before?" Chase asked.

Blossom and Cherry shook their heads. "We thought we already knew what was deadly in the forest, but the humans keep finding more ways to make it more dangerous for us to live."

"Well, we should warn the other foxes and try to keep any kits from wandering too close to the moss, considering the worse effects it's having on Iris' kit than Iris herself. I'll go grab some herbs from my den and see what I can do," Chase stated.

"My son...will he be okay?" Iris whimpered.

Chase moved over to the young kit. Though breathing, his breaths were weak, and when she shoved her ear to his chest, even his heartbeat was faint. She could do what she could, but she wasn't quite sure he'd make the night.

"I'll try all I can," Chase promised. She quickly left the sickly foxes to grab some herbs. Her kits were huddled in the corner, staring at their mother in confusion. "Before you all ask, there are some sick foxes I need to take care of," Chase said as she gathered spare herbs together in a pile with her mouth and paws. "Stay in here."

"Why are they sick?" Lily asked.

"I think we'll know soon enough. Don't leave this den, you hear?" Chase asked. She was becoming frightened knowing there was something poisonous out in the woods that her kits could easily get sick from. She was starting to realize the pain her mother, Apple, had felt when Rush died. Chase would never want her kits to perish.

That evening, Chase worked hard administering herbs and checking Iris and her kit's symptoms. Iris was steadily improving and appeared to be sleeping calmly, but Chase could tell already the kit wouldn't make it. He wasn't improving fast enough, and he was getting awfully weak.

When Chase visited the two the next morning, she saw Iris cradling her kit's body and knew he had passed.

"I'm sorry," Chase told Iris, who was now looking immensely better. "The poison must have a worse effect on a kit's body. It's probably not as fatal to fully-grown foxes. We need to make an announcement to the other foxes."

As the other foxes helped Iris bury her kit, Chase called the other foxes together. They were all confused, and a bit frightened, she could tell. Predators and humans were one thing, but a deadly moss that could potentially kill a kit just by touch was something else. The foxes would have to be more vigilant in the part of the forest where the moss grew.

Chase's kits huddled by her legs as she explained the deadly moss that she was sure had sickened Iris and killed her kit. The other foxes sprang questions onto her, like why she couldn't heal the sickness with herbs, why the moss had suddenly appeared, and so forth, though Chase could not answer those questions. Instead, she gave a description of the moss to the other foxes and recommended a patrol be sent out to verify what the moss looked like.

"Once we have confirmation on what the moss exactly looks like, no one, kit or fox, should come too close to it. I don't believe its poison is deadly enough to kill a fully-grown fox, but it seems almost certain that it will kill a kit who comes into contact with it," Chase

stated. "When the tods return, we need to warn them about this fox too."

The others were quick to agree, and Chase returned to her den feeling a bit disoriented and guilty for not being able to save the kit. It didn't help that she could still hear Iris' cries out by her kit's grave.

"You understand the seriousness of this matter, don't you?" Chase warned her kits. "I don't want any of you going unsupervised in the forest."

All three nodded their heads. She wished they didn't have to confront them with these topics so soon, but it was important they stay safe. The last thing she wanted was for Rock to return to less than three kits.

"Are we in danger?" Lily asked meekly.

"No. As long as we stay away from the moss. I've already told you about bad plants to eat in the forest. This is sort of the same, but we need to keep an even greater distance. Don't fret, any of you," she said, noticing their worried stares. "Now that we know it's dangerous, foxes will stay away, and no one else will hopefully get sick. Tomorrow, when the sun comes up, you can go play with your friends again, and all will be normal."

This calmed her kits some. As the sun vanished behind the hills, Chase's three kits curled close to her. She licked the tops of their heads and watched them slowly drift off to sleep. These past twenty-four hours had been a bit of scare, but she knew she would keep her kits safe no matter what.

Chapter 39

Even with the warnings about the moss that Chase had given, a kit or two had been lost regardless due to accidents, and one or two foxes had gotten sick. It hurt Chase and the other vixens to see this, but it at least confirmed Chase's theory that the moss was fatal to the kits, though not as much to the adult foxes. Still, she was adamant to her kits that they not stray far out of her sight, especially when farther in the woods. She never planned to take them close enough to where the dangerous moss grew.

The kits were getting larger every day. Their fur was now completely auburn, and Chase feared soon they'd be as large as her, or at least the tods anyway. They were still young kits at heart though. They loved to play with her, the other kits, and explore. She was reminded of herself when she looked at them.

A tugging at her ear woke Chase in the morning. Heron was nipping at her, trying to will her awake so they could go out and play. They were getting to the age that she would trust them enough to play in the surrounding area on their own, but she still feared them getting injured, and not wanting to feel the pain her own mother felt with Rush, Chase still tried to supervise them as best as she could.

"She's probably just ignoring you, Heron," Chase heard Lily say.

"Don't you want to play, too?" Heron retorted.

Chase grumbled slightly and opened her eyes, finding all three of her kits staring at her in anticipation. Though it was morning, the summer heat permeated the area. Chase couldn't imagine why they would want to be outside in this kind of weather.

"Can we go play now?" Fennel begged.

Chase slowly sat up and stretched her body before nodding and following them outside. She took a seat and watched them play with some of the other kits. A few vixens looked her way and gave

her smiles.

They were getting anxious.

Chase knew herself that as soon as the first chill came over the land, the tods would be returning. She was ecstatic at the thought of seeing her mate again, but she also feared his absence. She was sure the other vixens felt the same. It hurt Chase's heart to think that if something had gone wrong, Rock would never see how much his kits had grown.

"Is everything okay, Mom?" Lily asked from afar.

Chase glanced up. She hadn't noticed her daughter staring. Lily was more sympathetic than her brothers and had an eye for reading the emotions of the other foxes, especially her family members. Chase sometimes wished she could be as kind as her daughter.

"Ah, I'm fine," Chase lied, staring out at the foxes. Lily took a seat beside her, and they sat in comfortable silence. Chase opened her mouth once more, asking, "You didn't want to play with your brothers?"

"Oh, a little, but I think they want to explore more," Lily stated.

Chase nodded. "I thought having hunting lessons and specific times to visit would help, but..."

"I would like to see it some more too," Lily stated.

Chase smiled. "You kits remind me of myself. I wanted nothing else to explore as well. I used to go off on my own all the time."

"Really?!" Lily exclaimed.

"Yes, but...I don't want you kits to do the same, especially with the scares we've been having. I shouldn't have been out there myself. I got myself into a lot of trouble when I was your age," Chase said. She smiled to herself. As awful as parts of her kithood had been, she'd been thankful for the chance to explore as well. "So, what do you say we go in the woods today?"

Lily's ears raised sharply and she nodded.

The trees thankfully blocked out much of the sun in the afternoon, leaving Chase and her kits to wander around in the shade. She took them far away from where the moss grew. Instead of teaching them a hunting lesson today, she simply pointed out more aspects of the forest and let them all explore.

Fennel and Heron were eager to look around, so much so that Chase had to call them back every once in a while in fear they'd get lose if they wandered too far. Lily was curious, no doubt, but she kept closer to her mother. She was the least daring out of all of them, though Chase was glad for it. She wasn't sure what she'd be able to do if all of her kits were too curious.

"Maybe when Dad comes back, we can show him around the forest!" Fennel suggested.

Chase chuckled. "Yes. We can show your father all that you've learned."

"Will he be back soon?" Lily asked.

"I hope so," Chase told her, a sense of fear in her voice. She had not pointed out the very slim yet frightening possibility that Rock may not return at all. Not to mention the other fears she'd had--that he'd met another vixen, that he'd found a better forest and didn't want to return.

"All the other kits want to see their dads too!" Heron exclaimed as she walked along a fallen tree log. "I can't wait to see what he's like. I bet he's really strong and a great hunter."

"Ah, well, partially," Chase said, chuckling some. It hurt her to know that her kits only knew their father through stories, though hopefully, that would no longer be the case when he returned.

"What is he like?" Lily asked curiously.

"Well, your father is a good fox. He can hunt, and he knows the forest well since he grew up here, but he's also very stubborn, and a little bit dense at times," Chase said, giggling some as she thought of

Rock. She felt her heart pang at the thought of him.

"Hey, I think there's a stream up ahead!" Heron announced, rushing down the hill.

"Careful," Chase called, following behind him. She followed the kits through a bush that looked out over a small stream. The clear water glistened in the sunlight, while the tranquil sound of running water filled the air.

"Do you think we can catch a fish?" Fennel asked, beginning to dip his paw around in the water.

The stream was not full since it was the summer months, so Chase had no fear of the kits drowning. Instead, she sat back and watched them all as they began running up and down the stream, biting at fish she knew they'd never be able to catch without practice.

Watching all of their auburn pelts glisten in the sunlight, she thought of Rock, knowing how much he'd love to see his kits now. They were truly growing into wonderful foxes.

And strangely, she thought of Yew. Would he be happy for the life she had now? Was he watching over these kits as well?

Come back soon, Rock, Chase thought as she giggled slightly at her children after failed attempt to fish. She couldn't wait until they could all be one big family again.

Chapter 40

The hot days of summer had finally kicked in. It was getting too hot for her kits to play outside all the time, so Chase sometimes took them to the river, where it was cooler, for them to wrestle around by. Sometimes, she'd even give them hunting lessons since the prey was so plentiful this time of year.

As the hot season continued, Chase was reminded that the tods would be returning soon. At this point, she wasn't sure whether she was excited or nervous. She could not wait to see her mate again, but at the same time, if he was absent in the crowd of returning tods, then she wasn't sure what she'd feel. She wasn't sure she could go through such a loss again. And she wasn't sure what she would tell the kits.

One morning, Chase was sharing the fresh rabbit she had caught with her kits. She had tried to let them hunt for breakfast one day, but Fennel had only brought home a measly mouse that he'd mutilated so badly that most of the meat was inedible. Chase figured that until the kits improved some more in their hunting skills, she'd hunt for now.

Chase's ears pricked up at the sound of a fox running toward the dens. She glanced up, seeing one of the vixens rushing toward the other foxes, her eyes widened as if she had just witnessed something surprising.

"I can see the tods returning from over the hill!" she exclaimed.

Chase tensed. Were they back so soon? Was Rock among them? She grew quiet for a few moments, and her kits were quick to turn their gaze to her.

"Mom?" Lily asked.

"Your father may be coming home today," Chase said quietly, her heart pounding rapidly. The reality that he would be back was suddenly setting in. "Hurry and finish up your breakfast!" she commanded. "I need to lick all of your fur into place so you look good for your father."

"But I barely started eating," Heron complained.

"Finish up, finish up," Chase said, walking over to Lily and beginning to lick her fur. The other vixens and their kits were gathering around the dens, patiently waiting for their mates to return.

Chase moved on from Lily and began to lick Fennel and Heron's auburn fur. Both were whining and complaining, as well as still trying to get a few bites of meat in before Chase dragged them away so that they could stand in front of the entrance to their den.

"Sit up straight. Don't slouch," Chase told the kits, impatiently waiting. She could hear the sound of footsteps and noticed the first tods approaching. Her kits were quietly murmuring to themselves, probably trying to guess which one was their father. Chase realized that they had no recollection of what he looked like in their memory. She scanned the crowd, looking for Rock while her heart felt like it was about to beat out of its chest.

The crowd continued entering, yet Chase saw no rock. The number of tods entering was growing smaller and smaller, and she began to dig her claws into the ground, afraid she would feel the heartbreak of the same day as she lost Yew. She kept it together though, for her kits, not wanting to show them any signs of vulnerability.

Finally, she saw Rock's pointed ears and thick auburn fur, and she let out a sigh of relief, beginning to wave his tail at him.

"*That's* our father?" Fennel asked quietly.

"Sh," Chase said, shoving her tail over his mouth as Rock made eye sight with her and quickly ran to her. Without thinking, Chase ran to him, immediately nuzzling against his fur.

"Happy to see me?" Rock asked.

"I missed you," Chase said quietly. "I got worried for a second. You were taking your time."

"I was keeping watch in the back to make sure there were no predators nearby," Rock said. "You had nothing to worry about. I'm a strong fox."

Chase smiled and licked his cheek. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," Rock said, staring at her in admiration. His gaze drifted ahead, to where his three kits sat, staring at their father quizzically. Chase heard Rock let out a little sigh of relief. She guessed he had been worried too about the health of the kits, if all three would be there when he returned.

"Look how big you all are!" Rock said, walking toward the kits. They shied away from him some, still not familiar with his presence, but Rock continued talking anyway. "You were barely bigger than my paw when I left. Now you're almost as big as your mother!"

"Kits, this is your father, Rock," Chase said, properly introducing their father to them.

"Let's see," Rock said, staring at the kits. He pointed to the left first. "Fennel, then Heron, and of course, Lily."

"You actually recognized us?" Fennel asked.

"Of course," Rock replied. "I tried to keep you in my memory and imagine what you'd look like at an older age. I think I did a pretty good job remembering what distinguishes each of you. For example, Fennel, your fur has always been a bit darker. Lily has that beautiful large white patch on her chest. And Heron, one of your ears is darker than the other."

"Is it?" Heron asked, clearly not having noticed himself. Chase chucked a bit.

"Did you go on all sorts of adventures?" Fennel asked. "Did you fight

off any big predators?"

"Why don't we go inside the den, and then we can hear all about it?" Chase suggested.

For the duration of the afternoon, Rock recalled what had happened during the annual hunt. It was mostly stories of delectable pieces of prey he had caught, which made all their mouths water, though there were a few adventure stories here and there of how they'd almost crossed paths with a mountain lion or had strayed too close to the humans. They were all starving by the time that Rock had finished telling his story, and Rock himself offered to go out and catch prey.

"Can I come too?" Fennel asked.

"Also me?" Heron wondered.

Rock turned to Chase for approval. She dipped her head and nodded.

"But don't expect any great hunting skills from them," she warned Rock. "They're still learning."

"You're so rude," Fennel teased as he and his brother left the den with their father.

"You didn't want to go, Lily?" Chase asked.

"I can spend some more time with Dad later. I think it's good Fennel and Heron spend some time with him right now. They better catch a lot of prey," Lily said.

"Do you like your father?" Chase asked, worried that maybe Lily had strayed behind because she didn't feel any bond at all.

"Of course! I like his stories. He's a very loving tod. I can tell he cares a lot about us," Lily said. "I just wanted to stay here with you, that's all."

"That's very sweet of you," Chase said, licking her daughter's forehead. "Soon, we'll all be able to hunt as a family and explore the

forest together."

"I'm looking forward to it," Lily said. She was getting close to reaching Chase's height, though Chase wondered if she'd grow anymore. Lily had always been the runt of the litter, though it didn't stop her from being a great hunter. In fact, Chase was surprised she hadn't gone with her father after all. Her skills were better than her brother's.

Rock, Fennel, and Heron returned a little while later with some prey, and the family sat down and ate. They ate and shared stories for what had happened in the past few months until their bellies were full, and sleep was the only thing on everyone's mind. The kits fell asleep first, curled up against their mother, leaving Chase and Rock some alone time.

"You've taken very good care of them. I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help you," Rock said.

"Well, you're here now, aren't you? You can continue to watch them grow," Chase told him.

"You know. I was worried at first. Especially about what you said had happened to your sister. I thought maybe I'd come home to only one kit, or zero," Rock murmured.

"I made sure nothing bad would happen to them. I was mostly worried you wouldn't be able to come back and see them," Chase stated.

"The annual hunt isn't really that dangerous. We stay away from the more deadly parts of the forest," Rock explained.

"I know. It's just..."

"Just what?" Rock asked.

"Ah, nothing. I'm happy you're back," Chase told him.

"The other vixens have been talking about how much of an influence you've had around here. Going around and healing the other foxes, dealing with that horrific moss incident. I'm really glad

you enjoy it here. I was starting to worry you missed wandering around, or even your old forest," Rock stated.

"I would never miss my old forest," Chase told him. "It holds too many poor memories. But I love it here. I love this den, and I love the kits, and I love being here with you. I love you."

Rock smiled and leaned forward, his tongue gently rasping against her cheek."I love you, too. I'm glad to be back," he said.

Chase let out a loud yawn and slowly spread out, resting her head on her paws. Rock curled up on her other side, where there weren't three kits resting against her. It felt comforting feeling his fur against hers again.

"See you in the morning," Chase told him dreamily, happy to know he would be there when she woke up.

Chapter 41

The autumn wind nipped at Chase's fur in the morning. It had grown quite cold over the past few days, making it difficult for Chase to gather the energy to get up in the morning, especially when she saw those gray clouds rolling across the sky.

The forest was covered in fallen leaves. Chase was getting rather tired of the way she managed to crunch one right as she was about to catch a rabbit. It was getting harder to be stealthier with such brittle leaves on the ground. Her kits, who were still learning to be excellent hunters, were growing frustrated too.

"Ah, quit your whining. Soon enough the snow will fall, and then you'll really get to complain," Rock would tease his pups.

It had been nice having the whole family together again. Rock would teach his kits his own hunting skills in those warm summer months. They would wander down to the river sometimes, where it was much cooler, and watch the current flow.

The autumn months had ushered in soon after. Chase didn't think it would be long until the snow began to fall. Her kits were nearly grown, making it hard to believe they'd barely been bigger than the size of her paw in the spring.

Chase stretched out her aching joints and slowly woke the rest of her family members for a meal. They ate outside in the cold air, gnawing away at the freshly-caught kill.

"Why don't we all go hunting later?" Rock suggested. "Better catch the last bit of rabbits before they all go burrow in their little holes for the winter."

Fennel and Heron were quiet and awkwardly shuffling.

"Do you boys have something to say?" Chase teased.

"Well, we kind of wanted to hunt on our own," Fennel admitted.

Rock blinked in disbelief. "On your own?"

"We're old enough," Heron assured them.

"Oh, let them hunt. I was hunting alone at their age. They'll be fine," Chase assured Rock.

"Well, you were also a strange fox at your age," Rock grumbled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lily wondered.

Chase's personal life had not been shared much with her kits, or much with Rock, for that matter. She had never explicitly gone into detail about her situation back home, and she'd never even told Rock she had a mate. Her kits, meanwhile, knew nothing of their mother's past, not even the fact she'd keep an eye out on cats once in a while.

"Your mother was--"

"Oh, save your stories for later," Chase said, batting him with her tail. "You're free to do as you wish, Heron and Fennel."

They both grinned at each other before taking off in a storm. Lily rolled her eyes as she watched her brothers go.

"They've been talking about doing a solo hunt all week," Lily stated. "Been pacing around the den and everything."

"They're always like that though," Rock thought. "Always been rambunctious."

Chase supposed so, but Rock didn't know the kits as well as she did. Fennel and Heron, while a bit more energetic, didn't usually act so frenzied or anxious. She'd been noticing them acting more antsy for a while now, though she hadn't really had the courage to ask why. She wondered if they were just looking for a little independence. Chase had already achieved that at this age.

"Why don't we go on a walk in the forest, then?" Chase suggested.

"I'll stay back. I'm going to end up finding the kits and judging their skills," Rock stated.

"All right. Lily?"

"I'll come," Lily agreed, her ears perking up at the suggestion.

Chase smiled and walked into the woods with her, admiring the colors of autumn. As she glanced at Lily, she thought back to her kithood. She wondered if her parents had another litter of kits, if her siblings had found families of their own, or they were still with her parents. The possibilities were endless. Chase didn't like to dwell on these thoughts long though. Otherwise she got thinking too much, about Rush, about Yew, about Moonstar...

"Yuck! It smells like cat around here," Lily said, lifting her nose to the air.

"Well, the territory isn't far," Chase said, turning to the side. She felt herself gazing at the cats' territory more and more these days, though she wasn't sure why.

Since becoming mates with Rock and having kits, Chase hadn't had much time to think about cats, to think about her short-lived goal of uniting the cats and foxes. Cats only came up in conversation if they crossed the border or Rock muttered something. Chase had noticed him muttering nonsense about cats a little more often than normal, though it wasn't concerning to her at this point.

"Have you ever been in the cat territory?" Lily asked curiously.

"No," Chase lied. "And you shouldn't stray near. Those cats will take you down in an instant, no matter your size. They messed my mother up real good when I was just a kit."

"I wasn't thinking about it, really. I've never even really seen one around here. Just smelled their awful scent," Lily stated.

Chase had gotten used to the scent after all this time. Yew used to joke she smelled like cat after hanging out with Moonstar. There

she was, thinking about Yew again...

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Chase asked.

"What is it?" Lily wondered.

"Is everything okay with Fennel and Heron?" Chase wondered. "They've been acting kind of antsy. But I don't want to pry and be an overbearing mother."

Lily continued walking in silence, swishing her bushy tail in the air.

"I'm not really sure myself," Lily stated. "But I've noticed it too. I think they want to be more independent or something. I've heard them complaining about the forest, the same routine. But that's just me overhearing things! I haven't spoken to them about it directly."

"There's no need for you to. I might at some point, if they get worse. Rock hasn't noticed much. I think he's offended the boys went off and hunted on their own today, to be honest," Chase said, chuckling some.

"Really?" Lily asked, giggling too.

To be honest, Chase understood where her sons were coming from. She had been desperate to get away from her family for so long. Yew had promised an escape from that. And then she had come here, even leaving the forest she had once grown up in. It was difficult at the time, going through all that, but she wasn't sure what state she'd be in if she still lived with her family this day and age.

Chase turned and looked at Lily. She looked so grown-up now and had turned into a beautiful vixen. Chase wouldn't be surprised if she found a mate this mating season, though there was certainly no rush.

Chase's heart was beginning to ache these days when she realized how much her kits had grown, how they'd all have their own families soon, how...how not all of them might stay with her, or they'd go on the hunt or not come back. She didn't like to dwell on these thoughts too long. But seeing Lily happy made her happy. Lily

seemed to enjoy life here, and Chase was glad.

Soon, it would be winter, and then spring would be upon them. Chase wasn't interested much in having kits this time around. Having three had been enough, and she wasn't sure she could deal with Rock leaving again so soon after another litter.

My time as a mother has come and pass, I think, Chase thought as she smiled at Lily. Lily gave her a confused smile in return and kept walking.

Right now, all I can do is be there for my kits and keep supporting them, wherever their paths may lead.

Chapter 42

The air was growing colder, the leaves more brittle, and Fennel and Heron were still acting strangely around Chase. It was in subtle ways at first. They seemed distracted during conversation, they kept wanting to hunt alone, and she could sometimes hear them grumbling complaints about the way their home was run.

Though Chase would tell Rock about it, he often told her she was overreacting. Still, it was hard for Chase to sleep at night beside her sons knowing that something was possibly troubling them.

On a particularly rainy day, when many of the foxes were content simply staying in their dens for the day, Chase approached the two about it. Lily was off speaking to one of her close companions, Daisy, while Rock decided to go off for a hunt.

Fennel and Heron were, meanwhile, laying in the den, twitching in anticipation for the sun to come out so they could go off and hunt on their own. Rock had forbid they hunt in the rain, afraid they might lose track of where they were going. Chase had to admit he still often treated them like pups, even if all three of their pups were mostly full-grown by this point. Chase had even been living with Yew at this time when she was their age, away from her family.

"Fennel, Heron. Do you two have a second to talk?" Chase asked.

"What is it?" Heron asked, raising his head.

"Is something wrong, Mom?"

"Nothing is wrong with me," Chase assured them. "I didn't want to say anything, but I noticed you two have been acting anxious for a while now, and I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

"It's fine," Fennel said quickly.

Chase eyed her son. "You two can be honest with me, you know. I don't want us keeping secrets. We're a family, aren't we? So, what is it? A nice vixen one of you met? A secret hunting spot?"

The two paused for a moment, made eye contact briefly with each other, and then Heron began to speak.

"We...we don't think we want to stay here," Heron stated.

"I think Heron and I want to explore the forest on our own. Make a life somewhere else," Fennel added.

Chase was not expecting to hear *that.* She could not stop her heart from breaking slightly at the thought. Her beautiful sons, who she had raised since birth, were already ready to leave the den. She opened her mouth, a part of her wanting to immediately say no, that this was a safe place, and that they were far too young, but she knew better than that.

"Mom?" Heron asked, noticing a few spare teardrops that had begun to roll down her cheeks.

"Ah. Ignore me. Sorry," Chase said, turning away.

"We won't go then. Not if it makes you or Dad upset," Fennel promised, stepping forward to comfort his mother.

"No," Chase said defiantly. The two stepped back and took a seat. "That's not what I want. I don't want you to have to choose whichever option appeases me and your father. I know you two don't know much about my past. I understand where you're coming from."

"You do?" Heron asked.

Chase nodded. "I did not get along well with my family. I left the forest I had grown up in at a young age and traveled here, meeting your father. There was always a part of me that needed to leave too. So I...I understand where you're coming from, and you two are free to leave whenever you choose, if you feel ready that is. It's almost mating season, so to leave sooner rather than later would be good, I think."

"Are you sure?" Fennel asked.

"I can't make your decisions for you. You're both practically adults now."

"Thank you, Mom," Heron said, lurching forward to nuzzle her.

"Just a second," Chase warned. "Yes, I give my permission. But you two still need to tell your father. I am not sure he will react as well as me, but I'll talk to him. And what about Lily?"

"Lily?" Fennel asked.

"Is Lily leaving too?"

"No. We didn't talk to it about her. We know she likes it here. We thought she might be upset with us," Heron explained.

"Then you should speak with her too. Maybe if we share a meal later, we can all talk together. Sound good?"

Both of her sons nodded their head, while her stomach twisted as she thought of how her family was slowly being led in different directions.

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That evening, when the clouds faded and the moon came out, the five of them sat in the den, picking at a plump squirrel that Rock had caught earlier in the day.

"What's wrong?" Rock asked the boys, noticing they weren't eating much. "You two usually have an appetite that can't be filled, just like your father!"

Fennel and Heron quietly made eye contact with Chase, and she turned to her mate. "I think Fennel and Heron have something to say," she said.

Fennel cleared his throat and looked up at his family. "Heron and I have been thinking about this for a while, but...we would not like to stay here any longer. We both want to explore the forest for

ourselves, start lives somewhere else. We'll be leaving soon."

There was a pause as shock filled the den.

"You're out of your mind, that's what," Rock said, growling at them.

"Rock, now hang on," Chase warned, but her mate was already beginning to lash out at his two sons.

"This is a comfortable place! A lot of foxes worked hard to make this a quiet and safe place. You haven't even lived through one winter yet, and you think you can go out and explore the forest on your own? You'll be dead by morning," Rock growled at the two, causing Fennel and Heron to shrink in fear.

"Rock, stop. You don't know that," Chase scolded.

"Did you already know?" Rock asked, sensing Chase was clearly more calm.

"Yes. They spoke to me earlier today," Chase stated.

"Would you two really leave?" Lily asked quietly in the corner. Chase noticed the faintest bit of teardrops in her eyes, and her heart suddenly broke for her daughter. Everyone knew that for Fennel and Heron to leave meant they would most likely never return. If they left, she would lose her brothers, just as Chase and Rock would lose their sons.

"They are absolutely not! No questions asked," Rock stated.

"Rock. Now. Come on," Chase said.

He stood up and exited out of the den, grumbling as he descended away into the forest.

"That did not go well at all," Heron murmured.

"I'm sorry. I'll have a word with your father. He's upset because I think...I think he thought our family would be perfect. He didn't get to see you all that much when your kits, so I think he was happy to spend a lifetime with you all when he got back from the hunt,"

Chase explained.

Lily was quietly crying now, and Fennel moved her way to comfort her.

"Don't worry, Lily. We won't go."

"No," she said, lightly pushing him away with her tail. "You should. I know you two well, better than any other fox. And I know you two would do well on your own. I knew you were feeling antsy about being here. I just didn't want to believe it."

"Lily, dear," Chase said, motioning her daughter forward. Lily nuzzled against her, pressing her face into Chase's white chest as she quietly sobbed. It was hard on all of them, Chase knew that, and as she glanced outside, she knew it was the hardest on Rock.

As the kits went off to sleep for the night, Rock had still not returned. Chase decided to go out and find him. He was not lingering near the dens, so she traveled in the woods, tracking his scent until she found him, sitting near the border between the cats' territory and theirs.

"Rock," Chase said. "Why are you out here all alone? It's cold. And you're dangerously close to the cats, you know. I thought you liked keeping your distance."

Rock chuckled quietly to himself. "You know. I was thinking of when I first met you, lingering so near cat territory. You were all by yourself, but you were so fierce. I think I fell in love with you as soon as I met you."

"Rock," Chase said, slowly approaching him.

"I don't want them to leave. I wanted a family for so long, and now..."

"They're not kits anymore, Rock. Just as I wasn't when you met me. You know that I was on my own around their age. I got along just fine."

"But they're not you," Rock murmured.

"But they have my blood. And your tenacity too. They'll be fine, Rock. I don't want them to be unhappy staying here. And Lily is staying here, don't you know that? She has no intention of leaving. Not everyone will be gone," Chase assured him.

"It's so hard," Rock quietly stated. "I love them."

"I love them, too."

"I feel like I wasn't there for them enough," Rock said.

"You had the hunt. It's okay, Rock. They know you care about them a lot. But I think it's time to realize they're growing, and we need to let them go," Chase told him.

Rock shut his eyes and sighed. "I know you're right. And I was so mean to them tonight too. Do you think they'll forgive me?"

"Of course," Chase assured him. She leaned forward and licked his cheek. "The good-byes are tough. But I think they have great lives ahead. And I'll still be here, Lily will still be here. There are plenty of foxes that will still be here that you love."

"I love you, Chase," Rock said, grinning slightly at her. "I'll talk to them in the morning."

"Sounds good," Chase stated.

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It was several sunrises later, on a particularly warm autumn day when the sun was shining that Chase stood with Rock and Lily as they wished their two sons goodbye. Getting Rock's approval was the last thing they needed, and within a few days, they were sure to take off.

"Now are you two staying together?" Rock asked the tods.

"For a little while, until we get to a forest we like. Then, I think we'll split ways," Heron decided.

"Sounds good," Chase said.

There was a pause, and suddenly, all five were starting to grow incredibly emotional, even though they had thought all the tears had subsided days before.

"Take care, you two," Rock said, smiling at them. "I'm sure you'll have great lives."

"You two will get to explore for the first time. It will be exciting," Chase assured them.

"I'll miss you two," Lily said, staring up at her brothers.

"Keep Mom and Dad in good health here," Heron told Lily.

"I will," she promised, looking back at her parents and smiling.

"Are we ready to go then?" Fennel asked.

"I think so," Heron replied.

"Goodbye you two!" Rock stated.

"We love you," Lily called.

"Heron, Fennel," Chase called, making them stop in their tracks. "One more piece of advice."

"What is it?" Heron wondered.

"Be kind to every creature you see, even if it's the cats that live in the forest," she told them.

"Now why would they be nice to cats?" Rock grumbled, but Chase did not listen to him. She watched her sons nod and walk away, until they slowly faded into the horizon.

Chapter 43

We're down to the last five chapters :O

There was a gap after the boys had left where Chase, and she was sure Rock and Lily as well, felt empty. Some nights she still cried about them with Rock, hoping they were doing well. It didn't help that the weather was growing colder, stirring up negative emotions inside of her.

Although it was hard losing her sons, she knew it was for the best and that they were probably doing well. Having Lily stay comforted Chase, and of course, Rock was beside her as well, though she knew he would be joining the annual hunt again in the spring.

Though the days grew colder, the loneliness Chase felt was slowly subsiding, especially as all the younger foxes became eager to begin the mating season. The foxes were more cheerful than normal, even if snow was beginning to fall and the prey was becoming more scarce.

The sun was out brightly one day with not a cloud in sight, and Chase figured it would be a good day to go on a hunt. Rock had already left with some other tods, presumably to give them mating advice since he liked to boast how he had wooed Chase so. She often teased him for pretending he was a love master, considering he didn't get a mate until his second mating season. But Rock's seniority made the other tods reach out to him and get along well with him.

With just Chase and Lily left alone for the afternoon, they headed into the woods, straying from the cats' territory as Chase was aware that they were probably hunting all areas of the woods to make up for the loss of prey that came with winter.

"What do you think of your first snowfall?" Chase asked as Lily as

she gracefully pounced around in the snow.

"It's cold, but I like the way it feels under my feet," Lily said, giggling some. "I wonder if there is snow where Fennel and Heron are too."

"Maybe, maybe. They'll probably be as excited as you," Chase stated. It suddenly hit her how old she was becoming, watching Lily pounce around. Chase was no longer the young kit that used to run off to spy on cats from so long ago.

"Hopefully we find some prey out here," Chase said as they continued on.

"Do you all get used to the hunger?" Lily wondered. It was the first time she had experienced real hunger, Chase realized. It hurt her to know that Lily, or any of the foxes really, were getting enough food, but hopefully they'd manage. Chase somehow had.

"I just think that soon it will be spring again," Chase stated. "And all the little kits will be running around, and there will be a lot of prey."

"Will you and Rock have more kits?" Lily asked.

"Oh, heavens no!" Chase exclaimed. She and Rock had never really discussed the matter, but both had seem to come to an understanding that three kits were enough.

"Wow, quick to say no," Lily stated. "Didn't know if I'd have little siblings running around, you know."

Chase paused. "Are you lonely, dear?"

Lily shuffled her paws in the snow. "It's been hard...since Fennel and Heron left."

"But what about Daisy?" Chase wondered. "You two hang out often, don't you?"

"She recently became mates with Arrow, so we don't spend as much time together," Lily murmured.

"Do you not think Arrow is a good fit for her?"

"Of course, I do! But it just gets lonely, you know."

"Well what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Do you have your eye on any tods?" Chase wondered.

Lily shook her head.

"Why do you seem so down about it?" Chase asked. "Like I said, your father didn't get a mate until his second winter. There are plenty of tods for you to get to know."

"But I feel like they're all the same," Lily complained, letting out a long sigh. "I feel like I know all of them already. How did you know Rock was the one?"

"I didn't," Chase stated, beginning to walk along the woods now.

"What do you mean? Didn't you have your eye on him from the moment you met him?" Lily teased.

"If that's what your father is saying, then he's wrong. Besides he...he wasn't the first tod I loved," Chase murmured. These days she did not think of Yew much, unless it was growing near the mating season. She wondered if she'd said too much, spilling those details to Lily. She hoped her daughter would not listen too closely, but Lily's ears suddenly perked up.

"You liked someone else?!" Lily exclaimed. "Did Rock have to fight him for you?"

"It was in my old forest," Chase explained. "And I didn't just like him. We were mates."

"You had another mate?!" Lily gasped.

Chase growled at her. "Your father is not aware of that detail, and you are not allowed to share it with him either. But I'm telling you

because it might help you."

"Well, what happened? Where is he now?"

"He's dead," Chase murmured.

"Oh."

"I became mates with him at a young age, even younger than you, when all the leaves were falling. But he was killed by a human contraption one day, and that's when I left and came here to this forest instead," Chase explained.

Lily paused in her steps. "I'm so sorry, Mom. That must've been horrible."

"Yes, at the time."

"Do you miss him?"

"It's been so long, that not as much anymore. Do I still love him? Of course. He was a very unique fox. I was a quirky vixen myself when I was younger. Rock would say I still am probably. So when I met this other tod, I thought I'd found my match. He was like me. We got along well, and I saw myself living a lifetime together with him, but...things happen, you know," Chase stated. "But I wouldn't trade my time with your father for anything. I love Rock a lot too."

"I had no idea you had another mate. I would have never guessed. Because you and Dad get along so well, that I always thought...well, I knew you didn't grow up together, but it almost seemed like you did," Lily stated.

"I want to make clear that Rock was not a second choice or a way for me to get over my old mate. Rock is different than my old mate in both good and bad ways, but I still love him a lot," Chase explained. "But you really can't tell him I said all this, okay? Because I think Rock would be furious."

Lily giggled. "I won't. I won't."

"So don't just try to be mates with the first tod who shows interest

in you, I guess," Chase told her daughter. "Not all tods are the same. My first mate was unlike any tod I'd ever met. There's someone out there for you, Lily. I'm sure."

"Thank you, Mom," Lily said, giving her a gentle smile.

They hunted the rest of the afternoon, managing to scrap up a few birds that hadn't yet flown south for the winter. As they returned from their hunt, prey in their mouth, Rock greeted them.

"You were sure gone a long time and only came back with a few pieces of prey. What took you so long?" Rock asked.

"We were talking," Lily stated.

"Talking? About what?"

"Nothing important," Chase promised him.

"Well, quit your chatter next time and grab more prey. We're going to starve if all you two day is chat during prime prey hours," Rock complained as they headed to the den. Chase and Lily only smiled at each other and giggled, which infuriated Rock more. At that moment, Chase was grateful for the small family she had created.

Chapter 44

Though Chase had spoken to Lily about her past, she had expected nothing different between them. And for the most part, Lily acted her usual self. She hunted with her parents, spent time with her friend, Daisy, and Daisy's mate, Arrow, and for the most part, seemed to be enjoying her life. But Chase could sometimes see her daughter sending glances her way. Glances that seemed curious, as if Lily was wondering who her mother actually was.

It didn't help that Chase had overheard Lily pestering Rock about her mother's past. Though Rock himself could not give away much details. Chase had never told him much either.

She simply walked away from the den that day, not wanting to admit she had heard them. Chase wasn't bothered by her daughter's curiosity. She expected it. After all, there was a lot Chase had kept from everyone here. She had left her life with the cats back with Yew in the old forest. She supposed the past would come back to haunt her at some point though.

It was a particularly cold winter morning that Chase stepped out to hunt with Lily in the morning. Prey was growing more scarce, but the foxes were still managing to get by, even if Chase's stomach grumbled a little more these days.

"Oh, don't go that way, dear," Chase said as Lily wandered away from her. "You don't want any cats scratching up your nose."

"Oh, I barely recognized the scent," Lily realized, stepping away from the border she was rapidly approaching.

"Your nose will get better with time," Chase assured her.

"Have you ever gone into their territory?" Lily asked.

"Ah, once or twice, but I try not to," Chase explained. "I respect their boundaries. Even when the prey I've been chasing goes across

that border, I let it go."

"That's not fair. You were chasing that prey. I'd follow it," Lily argued.

"We need to respect the other animals that live in this forest. We trust that they don't invade their territory, and they trust we don't invade theirs, even if that doesn't work out all the time. We need to keep a balance in the forest," Chase explained.

"Dad goes into the border to hunt," Lily murmured.

"I know," Chase said, her voice growing sadder. Rock had never been a fan of cats. Chase knew this, but lately, he had grown grumpier with age. In some ways, he was starting to remind her of her father. Rock was no Copper. He was much kinder than that and loved Chase with all his soul, but he was starting to grow a larger dislike toward the cats with age.

"Did you...did you used to have something to do with the cats?" Lily asked.

Chase stopped in her tracks and slashed her bushy tail against the snow. "Where did you hear that from?"

"I'm sorry. I began prying Dad for more information. He said you used to talk about cats. But that he didn't know much else," Lily stated. "Mom...who...who are you?"

"Ah, well, I suppose someone would grow curious at one point. I suppose every fox is. After all, I didn't grow up here," Chase said, chuckling to herself some. She led Lily to a large pine tree, and they sat under it, sheltering from the snowfall that was beginning.

"Don't act scared. I'm not a bad fox," Chase teased, sensing the nervousness in her daughter as Chase began to tell her story. "I grew up in a forest far from here..."

Slowly, Chase began to draw out her story to her daughter. It was strange at first, recalling all that had occurred. She spoke of her poor family life--her cruel father, her strained relationship with her siblings, her father's resolve to condemn all cats for simply existing.

She spoke of the young kitten that her siblings had been forced to kill. Obviously, she filled in details about Yew, then began to speak about their plan--to unite the two predators, to create a forest of peace. She spoke of her relationship with Moonstar, and how it had possibly ruined her desire to help cats again. Lily sat and listened intently without asking questions.

"But why did you stop your plans?" Lily asked.

"Yew died, and I didn't know what to do. The clans had gone, and I decided to follow. It led me here, to your father, to this home, and well, I realized I wanted to be a normal fox for once," Chase admitted.

"Do you regret it? Not following your plan?" Lily wondered.

"Sometimes. I wanted to do so much when I was your age. It was too much to accomplish for just one fox. Maybe if Yew had lived, things would be different. But it's okay. I'm happy here with you and your father. I still wish that somewhere, someday we can find some sort of peace, that I can still help a cat or two, but those are large goals for today," Chase stated.

"Maybe I can help," Lily offered.

Chase smiled and licked the top of her daughter's head. "I appreciate you saying that, but it's all right. I'm over it now, really."

"Well, okay," Lily said. She could sense some disappointment in her mother's voice, and Chase couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed thinking of the legacy she had left behind, but looking at Lily, she knew she had made the right choice. Even if she hadn't been able to accomplish all that she had wanted, she still felt her life had been worthwhile.

"We should head back," Chase realized.

"Dad's going to be mad when we don't come back with any prey," Lily joked.

"He can hunt for himself for once," Chase teased. "He's a grown fox."

"You're right," Lily agreed.

Their sides brushed against each other as they walked under the snow-covered trees. Chase looked up and admired the icicles hanging from the branches. The sun had come out now, reflecting on the fresh, powdery snow. No, this life had not been what she expected, but she was thankful for all the encounters she had made along the way, the family she had made, and the forest she now called home.

I'm finishing this today, I decided. 2 more chapters left.

Chapter 45

"I still can't believe your parents let you wander into the woods and stare at cats all day. You and Dad would have never let me and Fennel and Heron wander off," Lily chuckled as she shared breakfast with her mother.

"Well, they weren't the best parents," Chase stated. "Besides, I knew the forest well. It wasn't like I was getting myself into danger."

"I'm just trying to picture you my age just staring at cats from a rock. No wonder Dad thought you were strange when he first met you," Lily chuckled.

Their conversation was cut short by Rock grumbling by. He took a seat beside them and began digging into his own prey.

"Cut out all that cat talk. Dunno why it's come up all again. Chase, stop filling Lily's head with stories about those predators. They're causing enough trouble these days. We don't need her getting involved," Rock grumbled.

That familiar attitude was back that Chase despised. She couldn't help but think that Rock sounded like her father when she spoke like this.

"We were just talking," Chase murmured.

"Lily, the cats are dangerous. They steal prey from here," Rock explained.

"You're only saying that because it's winter and you're hungry," Chase told him.

"I'm telling the truth!" Rock exclaimed.

Chase stood up and huffed at him before stalking off into the woods. She never got angry much at Rock, but these days, she was becoming increasingly more upset at him. He was not the same

naive young tod she had fallen in love with. She still loved him deep down. She knew he was still in there, but she knew age had made him angrier with the forest.

Chase sighed and slowly moved to the border of the cats. She had no intention of crossing it but instead paused at it and stared ahead for just a glance at a cat passing by. She remembered when she was young she used to sit and watch for hours just for a glance at some perked ears.

Chase laid down in the snow. It was starting to melt some. The day was strangely warm, and dark clouds gathered ahead. She rested her head on her paws and glanced ahead. For a while she laid there. The scent of cat was faint, and no matter how long she waited, she could not seem to get a glance of a single feline.

Sighing, Chase rose, right as the clouds began to open up and rain began to fall. Chase grumbled to herself and slowly made herself back to the den. When she stepped inside, both Rock and Lily rose immediately to meet her.

"We didn't know where you had gone!" Lily exclaimed.

"I was just hunting. Didn't have much luck," Chase lied.

"You shouldn't wander out when a storm is coming," Rock grumbled at her.

"I'm *fine,*" she told him, baring her teeth slightly.

Rock shrunk back, and as Lily moved back to her nest to lay down, Rock and Chase both awkwardly stood across from each other.

"I'm sorry. I know you...have a soft spot for the cats. I don't know why. I just don't want you getting hurt," Rock told her.

"I know. I'm sorry," Chase said, licking his cheek. She could not pretend she still wasn't mad at him, but she decided she'd let their argument subside for tonight. She was tired, and she didn't want go to sleep with the thought that Rock was mad at her.

Rock curled up next to her, and she slowly began to doze off as the

rain softly fell below. She supposed there would be a slushy mess in the morning. Rain at this time of year was strange. It was usually only snow that fell on days this cold.

Chase remembered her mother used to say when rain fell on days that snow normally did, that the forest was out of balance, that something strange was going on. It was simply young kit lore, but Chase couldn't help but remember that story as she fell into a deep sleep.

...

It was pitch black when Chase felt Rock moving against her. She lazily opened her eyes, noticing him up and moving. Half-asleep, Chase felt moved to call out to him, ask why he was awake, but her eyes were growing droopy once more. She saw him slink out of the den before she fell back asleep.

...

It was early dawn. The sun was slowly rising. Most of the foxes were still asleep. Yet all Chase could smell was the overwhelming scent of fresh blood. She figured that scent was what had woke her. As she slowly opened her eyes to the dawn of the new day, that was all she could smell. Hot, viscous blood that reeked of death.

Chase slowly sat up. Lily was still asleep, and Rock, too. Slowly, she remembered she had woken up once earlier in the night and had seen Rock exit the den. She had thought it was merely a dream, but as she sniffed the air, she realized the stench was coming from Rock.

Slowly, Chase approached him, doing her best not to wake him. She stepped back with a glance when she noticed that his paws were stained with blood. There was still some stained blood on his claws.

Her first thought was that Rock was injured, that something must have happened to him last night, but with a glance, she realized he had no wounds. In fact, he was sleeping soundly, his chest rising and falling at a peaceful glance.

She then noticed the clumps of brown fur between his claws. It was a lighter fur, one that did not resemble a fox's fur at all. Once again cautiously approaching her mate, she leaned down, sniffing his paws. There was something else mixed in the scent of blood. She wanted to assume it was just a piece of prey, that he'd gone out for late night hunting, but there was no mistaking this scent.

His paws reeked of *cat.*

Chase stepped out of the den, rushing into the woods before she promptly vomited. What had happened? Why did Rock's paws look like that? Why was there cat fur? He was normally a clean hunter. His paws were rarely stained. Which meant...he had fought a cat, possibly killed a cat, and he had done it violently.

Chase leaned against a tree, slowly catching her breath. But why? What had prompted Rock to do it? He'd never shown such violence before.

Maybe I'm overreacting, Chase thought. *Rock wouldn't really murder a cat, would he? He wouldn't fight a cat without a good reason.*

Chase felt woozy, and as the sun rose, she desperately wanted to stay in the woods. But she knew Rock and Lily would worry, especially when she had taken off the day before. So she slowly walked back, ready to confront her mate about what had exactly transpired the night before.

Upon coming back to the den, however, she found Rock and Lily enjoying a meal. The scent of blood was gone, and Rock's paws were clean. Chase paused, staring down at them in confusion. No, she had not imagined it, had she? Rock's paws were certainly stained with blood this morning.

"Chase, there you are. We thought you'd gone hunting," Rock stated. "No luck?"

"Oh, um, no," Chase said.

"Are you okay, Mom? You look sick," Lily remarked, worry on her face.

"Oh, I'm fine."

"Something bothering you?" Rock wondered.

"No."

"Then would you like to eat with us?" Rock wondered.

"I'm not hungry. I think I'll go rest for a while," Chase stated. She walked back to the den and laid down, confused and tired as ever. She was not sure what Rock had exactly gotten himself into the night before, but she had never felt more upset with him than at the moment.

Chapter 46

It had been a few weeks since the incident. Under normal circumstances, Chase would have distanced herself from her mate, found some alone time, but Rock seemed to have no idea what Chase knew. Besides, Lily would worry if her parents suddenly grew sour to each other, so Chase went back to her normal self, acting like nothing had happened.

It was early afternoon, and the sun was shining bright. The snow was back once more, and many of the cats had resigned to their den. Chase was sitting in there while Lily spent time with Daisy. Rock was speaking with another tod outside. Chase wasn't paying much attention to the conversation, until she heard her mate speak.

"Yeah, caught the little fellow right at the edge of our territory looking for prey. So I did what I had to do," she heard Rock say.

"Sometimes it's just what you have to do. This winter is tough," the other tod replied.

Chase stiffened and slowly sat up, beginning to feel sick to her stomach again. Rock walked in a moment later, staring at Chase confusedly.

"Are you okay?"

"Why did you do it?" she whispered.

"Do what?"

"You killed that cat," Chase growled.

"Chase, listen," Rock began.

"I can put up with you talking about cats that way, even chasing them away and giving them a scare, but you...I can't believe you. You would never do something like that," Chase thought in disbelief. "I smelled the blood on your paws that morning, but I

couldn't believe it."

"I was angry, okay!" Rock exclaimed. "I'm sorry. I was angry that you were talking with cats with Lily. I couldn't sleep that night, and so I went out to hunt where I found that cat. They're nuisances, Chase. When will you realize that?"

Chase let her shoulders sink. "It's fine. It was too much to expect from you, that you wouldn't harm a cat. Every other fox has. I know I'm different in that way. I think I'm going to to go for a walk."

"Are we okay?" Rock asked.

Chase gave him a faint smile. "I'll get over it, okay?" She knew she would. Perhaps not at the moment, but she had been with Rock too long to leave him for this mess. It was disappointing and upsetting. She wanted to cry as she wandered through the woods. She had never missed Yew so much in the moment.

She supposed she'd hunt for a while to get her mind off of things. What was done was done. The cat was dead, and there was nothing she could do. She only hoped she could persuade Rock to act differently in the future. There was no need for such unnecessary violence.

Chase walked through the woods until she heard anguished cries ring out nearby.

"Oh no! Oh no!" came a loud voice.

Chase tilted her head. The voice definitely belonged to a fox, but she could not recognize the voice. Slowly, she approached the source of the noise. She peeled back some bushes, finding a young tod, probably around Lily's age, cursing to himself and walking in circles as he studied his tail.

Strange, Chase thought. *Usually only young kits chase their tails like that.*

"Hello?" Chase asked, stepping forward.

The young tod froze, apparently thinking he was alone. He looked

distressed, though Chase wasn't sure why. He didn't appear to have any injuries of sorts. In fact, he seemed very healthy.

"Why are you yelling?" Chase asked.

The tod slowly collected himself. "Um, no reason."

Chase eyed him with suspicion. This fox was certainly from a different forest. He had a strange scent, one that was almost cat-like, though she supposed that was because he had come from the cat's territory.

"My name is Chase," she said, hoping introductions would ease his nerves. "I've never seen you before."

The tod, though collected, suddenly began to become an anxious ball of energy once more.

"That's because I'm not really a fox! I'm really a cat! Another cat turned me into a fox! I belong to the clans!" he exclaimed in a distressed tone.

Chase blinked. That had been a lot of information to take in. But judging by all the distress, she actually believed him. Was this what StarClan had sent her way? A cat to aid? Even if she had given up uniting the cats and foxes a long time ago, it seemed her time to act as a peacemaker had not ended yet.

Chase could not tell the cat she believed him though. It would cause issues with the other foxes, considering they were not fond of cats. Rock had just killed one. So instead, she figured she could offer him a warm home in the meantime while they sorted everything out.

"My, you young foxes and your imagination. That's silly talk. What is your name?" she asked.

The tod seemed disappointed.

I believe you, Chase thought, wishing to convey that thought through eye contact, but the fox just couldn't seem to get the message.

"My name is Stone," he said.

"Nice to meet you, Stone. Where are you from?" Chase asked.

Stone had seemed to be done sharing his dilemmas. He was very poorly pretending to be a fox now.

"Um...another forest far away. I came here looking for new foxes," Stone said.

"Well, you've stumbled into our hunting grounds. Follow me," Chase said.

Stone hesitated for a moment, but Chase gave him a smile. She was here to help him, and she hoped he trusted her. He reluctantly put a paw forward and began to follow. Chase gave him a warm smile and began to lead him to the others.

Finally, it was time to work with cats once again.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *CHASE.* I am still shocked how rapidly this novel gained attention by all of you. I remember people excitedly eating up in the first few chapters, and I am glad to have seen the continued support throughout the release of the novel.

In case this was not made clear before and you were confused by the abrupt ending, *CHASE* is a **prequel.** I wrote this novel with the intention of creating a backstory for Chase, who is a main character in the *The Cat and The Fox,* another Warriors cats novel of mine.

So, yes. If you have not read *The Cat and the Fox* and want to know more, I would suggest picking it up after finishing this novel. Just as a forewarning, *The Cat and the Fox*, while a really popular work of mine, was written seven years ago in 2012. So the writing is going to be subpar to the writing you've seen here, but hopefully the story is still enjoyable.

I thank you all for your invested interest in this story. I am sorry if it did not turn out the way you wanted it to. I almost wanted to redirect the story to really fulfill Chase's goals and dreams, but that would not be true to Chase's story that plays out in *The Cat and the Fox.* I had fun writing Warriors from a slightly different perspective, and I hope you all enjoyed reading about cats from a fox's perspective as well.

Thanks for following me on this year and a half journey of writing *CHASE.* Please check out my other works, both Warriors and non-Warriors. I promise I have some really enjoyable stuff published on here.

Keep on reading,
Maeve